JULY
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ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

A DELL MAGAZINE
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MAJESTY'S RANCHO BY ZANE GREY (MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT)

Lance lifted her out of the saddle.

Majesty's Rancho, Chap. 12

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

Vol. 3, No. 5—July, 1949

NOVEL (magazine abridgment)

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LANCE SIDWAY, *weary of Hollywood's glitter and glamour, sets out to discover if there is anything left of the Old West. He rides his magnificent horse, Umpqua, into the rangelands of Arizona—and spang into as much adventure and danger as ever tested the mettle of a cowpoke in days gone by.*

Lance catches on as a rider at the once prosperous ranch of Gene Stewart, an old-time gunman turned cattleman who has fallen upon evil days. The poor beef market, combined with depredations by rustlers and the unwise indulgences of "Majesty," his extravagant, spoiled daughter, have brought Stewart to the brink of financial ruin. And when Majesty shows up at the ranch in disgrace, having been expelled from college, a strange hostility develops between her and Lance in spite of their instinctive attraction to each other.

The girl brings a crowd of her boisterous, hard-drinking college friends to the ranch for a summer-long vacation spree. Light-hearted gayety prevails on the surface, but sinister events foretell approaching disaster. Stewart is wounded in a skirmish with rustlers, during which Lance Sidway finds that he himself is no mean hand with a gun. Then the remnant of Stewart's once vast herds—his last remaining asset—is run off.

Lance, who has been striving desperately to introduce new methods and a semblance of life into the slipshod, lackadaisical operations of Majesty's Rancho, takes the bit in his teeth and sets out alone to recapture Stewart's wandering livestock. As usual, he finds his task complicated by his employer's exasperating daughter, though this time it's hardly her fault; Honeybee Uhl, an underworld character with whom she has once carried on an ill-advised flirtation, abducts her, determined to take by force what she has refused to give him willingly. In a rousing climax, Zane Grey shows that the spirit of the Old West survives in the twentieth century and that the gun is still the ultimate arbiter when justice and right are flouted by ruthless men.

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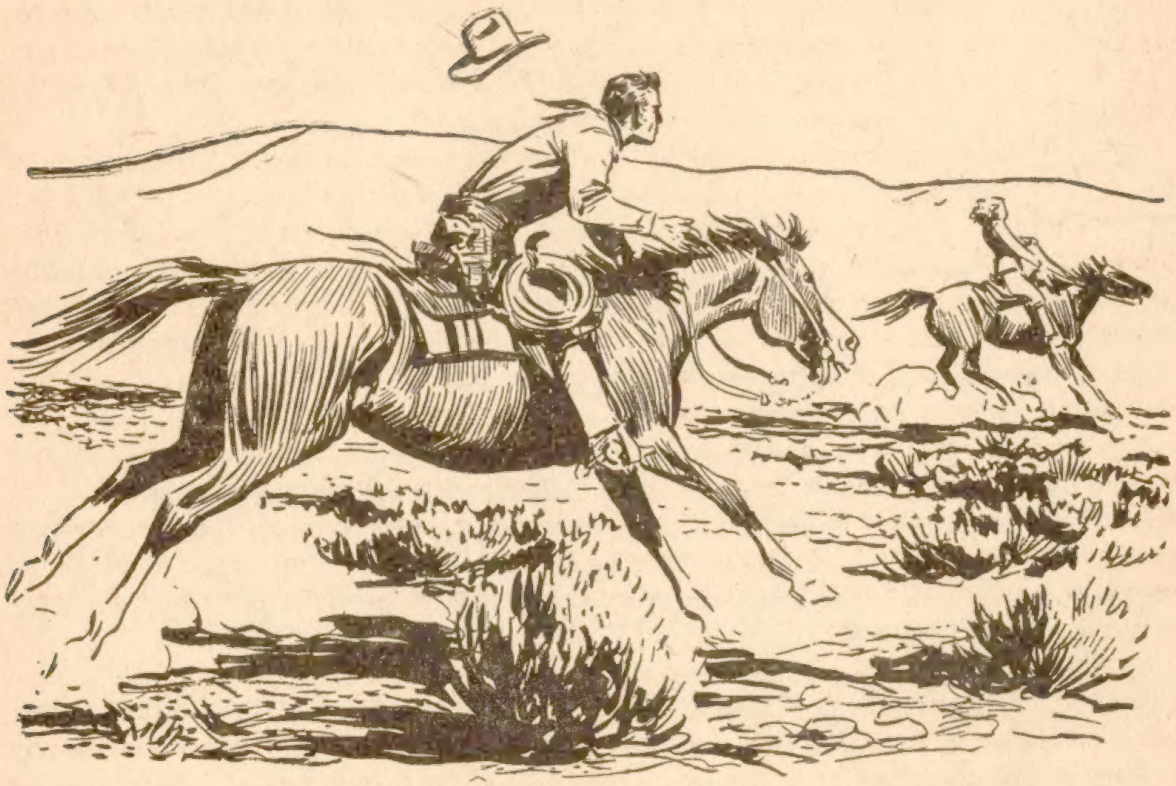
ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

DON: *The Story of a Lion Dog*

Zane Grey's moving story of a fearless dog who served his master to the end.

ON SALE ABOUT JULY 5

By ZANE GREY



Majesty's Rancho

CHAPTER ONE

Man With a Horse

LANCE SIDWAY pulled himself up from the stone steps of the Natural History Museum. He laughed ruefully as he realized that this was his third visit to the institution. As on his two previous excursions, he had wandered round and round the inside halls examining the mounted specimens of wild animals. He loved four-footed creatures, and though a pang beset him to see these lifeless counterfeits of what had once been the free beasts of the wild, he yet experiencd a sense of escape and peace that he had not felt since he left his Oregon range home for Hollywood.

There was, he knew now, a future in the motion-picture studios for his great horse "Umpqua," and perhaps one for himself as well. But he shied at becoming an actor and hated to double for the handsome cowboy Apollos of the screen; and to hang around the studios merely as the owner of a wonderful horse, letting the spirited animal earn his living for him, did not fit his idea of a career.

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As a matter of fact, he had never desired a future in Hollywood under such circumstances and the immediate necessity for earning money was over. Nance, his sister, was perfectly well again after her operation and would soon be married. So in demand, indeed, had Umpqua been that Lance found himself with at least enough cash in hand to last him until he could find a job more to his liking.

He found himself leaning toward a horseback ride through southern California, across Arizona, perhaps into New Mexico. To be sure, the cattle business was practically ruined, but the desert ranges and purple uplands of Arizona, or the silver-grassed valleys of New Mexico, about which he had read so much, would be vastly wilder and infinitely freer than the old pastures he had ridden, and surely there would be some kind of a job for a husky chap who was fond of animals.

He arose with a springy step to gaze at the hazy Sierra Madres, beyond which barrier there was an unsettled land. He strolled through a long terrace of roses, sensitive to their color and fragrance. They were beautiful, but he liked wild flowers best. Meanwhile he was revolving in mind the problem of riding Umpqua out of California. The horse was fat and needed work. He would not care much for the asphalt roads; perhaps, however, from Palm Springs south Lance could keep mostly to soft ground. Once in condition again, Umpqua was good for 50 miles a day without turning a hair.

Lance emerged from the Museum park, and presently, strolling along, he found himself on the edge of the University campus. Students of both sexes were in evidence, some chatting in groups, others moving along with books under their arms. These bareheaded boys and girls in their colorful sweaters, young and full of the joy of life, aroused memory and regret in Lance. After high school he had attended college in Corvallis for nearly a year, and outside of freshman miseries, which now seemed sweet, he had done well in his studies and better in athletics. But financial trouble had intervened, and Nance's illness, both of which had sent him to Hollywood. This college atmosphere was something that he liked. If only his father had not died, to leave Nance and him orphans!

Lance cast off the sadness. His sister was well—happy—and he had the greatest horse in the West and a new adventure in that West before him. Pretty lucky, Lance thought he should be telling himself! Reaching a cross street Lance halted to absorb more of the flash of color on the campus. He sauntered up the cross street toward some shade trees. On that side there were more students. He heard bantering voices and gay high-pitched laughter.

The shrill sound of a siren disrupted his attention, as well as that of the students. Wheeling, Lance saw a bright topless roadster turning the corner from the main street. Its driver was a bareheaded girl with hair bright as spun gold. At the moment she withdrew her extended left arm. Behind her raced the car with the loud horn. It caught up with her. One of the two occupants, surely policemen, yelled for her to stop.

The young woman took her time about it, and passing Lance, finally halted at the first shade trees where half a dozen students had congregated. Lance had not far to go to reach them and he strolled along, curious, expectant, and a little angry at the gruff yell

of the officer. Lance was in time to hear:

"Why didn't you stop?"

"I have stopped," replied the girl coolly.

Lance joined the group of students who had advanced to the curb. From all points on the campus others were coming, some on the run. Then Lance saw the girl at close range. Many a time in the studios and on the locations had he sustained a shock of masculine transport, but he had never seen a motion-picture star who in his opinion could hold a candle to this girl.

"Majesty, what do these cops want?" queried a tall young fellow, stepping out.

"I'm not sure, Rollie," she replied with a laugh. "But I think they want to chase me off the streets."

"What's the idea, officer?"

"If it's any of your business, she was speedin'," returned the other, a burly man, red-faced and thin-lipped, alighting from the police car. "*I* know her an' *she* knows me."

"Yeah?" queried the student insolently.

"Yeah! She was makin' forty-five on the turn an' she didn't even hold out her hand."

"Say, ossifer, *we* saw this lady turn and she wasn't making twenty," interposed another student.

"Lay off us kids, can't you?" asked another plaintively.

"Aren't there enough drunk drivers to keep you busy?"

"Looks a little steamed up himself."

Good-natured catcalls and boos sounded from back of the circle of students, crowding closer and denser. They sensed events. Lance gathered that the officers did not fail to grasp something inimical to their own well-being at the moment.

"Give the girl a ticket, Brady, and let's get going," advised the one at the wheel.

A storm of protest went up from the foremost line of students. Rollie, who evidently had some distinction on the campus, yelled for them to shut up.

"Beat it, you flatfeet!" he called sharply. "You hang around here and run us fellows ragged. But lay off the girls. Get that? We won't stand for it."

"You shut up or I'll run you in," said Brady angrily, as he began writing the summons.

"Madge, is it coming to you?" Rollie asked.

"Not this time, Rollie, I swear," she replied. "I did run away from him some days ago. But today I wasn't making twenty."

"You tell that to the judge," said Brady coldly. "An' you're interferin' with an officer of the law."

"Law, hooey! Only when there's nothing in it for you. Get the hell out of here!"

The crowd of students surged over the sidewalk and pulled the officer from the running-board of the car. He made the mistake of raising his fist, and striking himself free he shouted to his companion, "Send a riot call!"

At that juncture a motorcycle policeman roared up to make a fringe of students in the street hop out of his way. Brady hoarsely repeated his order to him, and with his comrade, both swinging their arms, cleared a space.

Lance had been shoved off the pavement by the pushing of the students, all of them roused now and full of devilment. Rollie appeared to be the only one who took the affair seriously. The girl, Madge, acted as if she were enjoying the proceedings. But her violet

eyes were ablaze. Rollie leaped on the running-board and leaned close to speak low to her. Then Brady, turning with red visage and bristling front, jerked Rollie down.

"Young woman, get away from that wheel," he ordered, opening the door. "I'll take you for a little ride."

"Like hell you will," she rejoined, her voice as ringing as a bell. And she snapped the door shut.

Brady's attention veered to a charging crowd of students who pushed the officers' car down the street, while another gang, yelling like Indians, rushed the truck of a fruit and vegetable vender who had happened along. They halted him, and in gold and red streams they spilled the mounds of oranges and tomatoes into the street. Another moment saw the air full of colored missiles. Their target was the offending car of the law. A smashing of windows and clinking of glass mingled with the derisive yells of the assailants.

Then the driver, who had attempted in no gentle manner to drive the students from crowding Brady, turned to roar at the slingers. A huge soft tomato struck him squarely in the face. That elicited a howl of fiendish glee from the armed force in the street. A hail of oranges and tomatoes not only halted his belligerent rush but blinded him, swamped him, knocked him flat. At the moment, then, a blare of sirens announced the arrival of reinforcements.

Lance hung by the girl's car while the students, numbering hundreds by now, rushed into the street, whooping like a lot of Indians. What was left of the vender's ample supply of oranges and tomatoes disappeared from his truck as if by magic to take swift form of a colorful barrage right at the charging policemen. For a while they were held back, but as the supply of ammunition began to diminish, they forged forward, eventually to drive the students out of the street upon the campus. But it was not an onslaught such as Brady and his man had attempted. The students were having a wonderful time, but the officers, plainly disgusted and angered though they were, did not resort to violence. Against three hundred crazy students they could do nothing save harangue them off the street.

Lance, keenly enjoying the whole performance, was suddenly startled by a cry from the girl in the car. And as he wheeled he leaped off the curb. Brady had opened the car door.

"Move over, Blondie," he ordered, a rude hand on her shoulder.

"You dirty bum! Don't you dare paw me!"

"I'm drivin' you to the station," declared Brady, shoving at her.

"You are not!" she cried, starting the engine. "Get off or I'll spread you along the street. I'll drive to—"

Lance snatched the policeman's hand off the car and as he turned in surprise Lance hit him a blow on his rather protruding abdomen. A gasping expulsion of breath followed the sodden drumlike sound. Brady began to sag. Lance reached up with powerful hand, pulled him off the running-board, and then with a vicious swing of fist at the convulsed visage he laid the officer neatly in the street. In action as swift, Lance vaulted into the car.

"Step on it!" he yelled. And almost before the words passed his lips the little car shot ahead. Lance's knees came up hard under the dash. A shrill blast from the horn sent several students leaping for their lives. Then the car ate up the open street, to whirl at the corner, and speed on, describing swift

half-circles in the traffic. Lance's hat went flying, and as the car grazed a trolley his hair stood up stiff.

Though scared as he had never been, Lance's heart strangled a cowboy yell in his throat and his blood beat thick in his ears and he was possessed by a wild elation. The car whirled off the thoroughfare into a quiet street, on which the houses blurred in Lance's sight. Another turn, then block after block on a traffic-congested street, then a break in the speed—and at last a parking-place!

"Whew!" exploded Lance, catching his breath. "We'd have shaken them—if they had chased us."

"Swell, wasn't it?" rejoined the girl with an amazing coolness. And she uttered a low laugh.

"I'll tell the world. Say, but you can drive," burst out Lance, turning to look at her.

With steady beautiful hands, and shapely coral-tinted finger tips she was taking a gold-monogrammed cigarette case from her purse.

"Thanks. Have a cigarette?"

"Don't mind."

"Did I scare you?"

"Yes—but it was a great ride."

"Well, we got the best of those cops anyway, and now we're just two fugitives from justice."

All this time Lance was gazing at the girl, conscious of a mounting exhilaration. To find pleasure in the beauty of women had been the only debt he owed Hollywood. But this visual experience seemed a magnifying of all former sensations.

"Oh, your hand!" she exclaimed, in sudden solicitude.

Then Lance became aware that he was opening and shutting his right hand, the knuckles of which were bruised. It was a big brown member, matching his brawny wrist.

"Bunged my fist—a little," he said awkwardly. "Nothing much."

"No? I wonder what that cop thought. I'll never forget his face. I was looking at it when you socked him. Did that tickle me?"

"Then I'm glad," returned Lance, beaming at her.

"You see, he was sore at me. He's caught me before. Last time I made eyes at him, you know, and let him think— I had a date and was late. Next time he spotted me I ran away from him. Today he must have been laying for me."

"So that was it? Big fathead! You'll get hauled up for this. I'm sorry. But I had to slug him. I was looking at you when he—"

"Don't be sorry. You made me your friend for life. Rollie was mad, but he wouldn't have done that. You're not a college man?"

"No. I went one year at Corvallis. Then—but that wouldn't interest you. I—I'd better be going."

"Don't go yet," she replied, detaining him with a hand on his sleeve. "Indeed I am interested. You're not going to walk out on me after such a romantic adventure. Are you?"

"Why, Miss Madge—I—you— Of course, that's up to the lady."

"It always should be, even if it isn't. Tell me about yourself. I'll bet you're from Hollywood. You have that cut."

"I'm not a movie actor," said Lance quickly.

"No? Too bad! You're handsome enough to be one. My sorority sisters will be jealous. I'll have you out to the house to meet them."

"That'd be swell. But I'm afraid it's not possible. Thank you."

"You're not married?"

"I should say not."

"Nor in love. I know how that malady affects them," she replied flippantly. "You'll come, won't you?"

"You're very kind. I–I have to say no."

"Well, of all things. A turn-down from a cavalier who fought for me! It doesn't happen, at least never yet–they always say, 'How about a date?' What're you doing out in Hollywood?"

"I own a horse. He's been in pictures, not I. Oh, I've had to ride him a few times, doubling for these actors. I hated that. It's almost as tough on me as letting them ride him."

"A wonderful horse. How thrilling! I love horses."

"As much as cars?"

"More. We have a ranch and some Arabians– What's his name?"

"Umpqua."

"Umpqua? Must be Indian?"

"Yes, it is. Means swift."

"Then he can run?"

"Run! See here, little lady, Umpqua is as swift as the wind."

"I'll bet I've a horse than can beat him."

Lance laughed. Here apparently was a real Western girl. It did not detract from the dazzling glamour of her.

"Is he pretty–beautiful–grand, or what?" she continued.

"All of them. Umpqua has Arabian blood," replied Lance, warming to her interest. That seemed to put him on her level. "He is big and rangy. Mottled black with white feet and nose. Bright soft eyes. Spirited but gentle. And this Hollywood game hasn't done him any good. That's why I'm going to quit it and leave this place. Ump is too fine, too sweet a horse for Hollywood."

"You love him, don't you?" she said softly, as if she understood.

"I'll say I do. Why, he saved Nance's life–Nance is my sister. Umpqua was given to me when he was a colt. He's cowboy-bred. On the Oregon range near Bend. And no horse ever had ten years' better breeding. Well, Nance and I were left alone. We lost the ranch. I had to quit college. She fell ill. It was necessary to have special treatment for her–operations and all–to save her life. So to earn the money I brought Umpqua to Hollywood where I had been assured of a job. And did he make good? I'm telling you."

The girl's eyes were bright with interest. "Splendid. And your sister–Nance?"

"Just fine now. She's going to be married soon."

"Swell! Oh, wouldn't I love to see Umpqua? But I wouldn't dare. I'd want to buy him. I always try to buy everything I like. And you'd hate me. That wouldn't do at all. Cowboy, are you leaving town? Wouldn't you like–couldn't we meet again?"

"Why–I–I–hope to see you again," stammered Lance.

"We have a lot in common. Horses and ranches–and things," she went on, consulting her wrist watch. "Let's see. If I don't get pinched and haled into court, I can cut psych. Say two-thirty, here, tomorrow. Will that be convenient?"

"Okay by me," replied Lance, and opened the door to step out.

"Thank you for all you did. Goodby till tomorrow. And be careful. Don't forget you punched a cop. They'll be looking for you if they can remember what you look like. I won't forget."

Lance stood there rooted to the spot, watching the bright car and golden

head flash out of sight. Then, expecting to come down to earth with a dull thud, he found himself in the clouds. He soared while he hunted for a westbound trolley and the long ride out seemed only a few moments. Riding a block past his street augured further of his mental aberration. He strode on, out of the main zone of buildings, into the hills, and up the canyon where he had lodgings with a man who rented him a little pasture and stall for his horse. Lance went into the alfalfa-odorous barn. Umpqua nickered at him.

"My God, Ump!" said Lance, as he put his arm over the noble arched neck and laid his cheek against the glossy mane. "I've fallen like a ton of bricks. Hardest ever! No, old pard, not a movie extra or even a star. But a college girl. Another blonde, Ump! Only this one has them all backed off the lot— So that's what was wrong with me when I sat dumb in her car?"

It amazed Lance extremely that he could not immediately find the parking-place where he was to meet the girl. He had been so balmy, he thought, that he had scarcely known whether he was walking or riding. It was a good thing that he had come downtown so early. After wandering around, up one street and down another, at last he found the vacant lot which had been utilized to park cars. He was still a quarter of an hour ahead of time.

An attendant, observing Lance loitering around, told him he could sit in one of the cars if he were waiting for someone. Lance promptly availed himself of this permission; in fact he took a back seat in a car standing against a building. Lance did not believe she would come at all; if she did he wanted to see her before she spied him. The buoyancy usual with Lance at a rendezvous seemed to be wanting here. This was a tremendous occasion.

He could see a large blue-handed clock in a tower some distance away, and watching this, as the half-hour neared, he gave way more and more to inexplicable feelings. If she came, that would be proof she liked him, and maybe— Why not postpone his departure for Arizona? A few days or even weeks would not make any particular difference. If she wanted to see him, take him to the house to meet her friends, perhaps go out to see Umpqua —how could he ever resist that?

"Gosh! I was a dumbbell for coming," he muttered, kicking himself. "She's late now. She won't come—and am I glad?"

Nevertheless he lingered there, sliding down in the seat, watching with hawk eyes the passing cars, slowly succumbing to a pang in his breast. At a quarter to three he gave up hope.

Then a bright tan roadster flashed into sight. It slowed and turned in. The driver was a girl in blue. But her blue hat did not hide a gleam of gold. She had come! Lance's heart gave a leap and his blood gushed through his veins.

Then a seven-passenger car, shiny black in hue, flashed into sight, slowed and stopped outside the turn. From it leaped a slender young man, noticeably well-dressed. He waved the car on with sharp gesture and came hurrying, his piercing gaze on the blond girl.

Lance saw her sweep a quick glance all around the parking-place. She was looking for him, and the disappointment she expressed was so sweet and moving to Lance that it would have drawn him out of his hiding-place but

for the mien of the newcomer.

She had halted at an angle from Lance's position, perhaps a dozen steps distant, and scarcely had she dismissed the polite attendant when the other man caught up to lean over the side of her car. He did not remove his soft gray hat. He had a remarkably handsome visage, pale, chiseled as if from marble, a square chin and ruthless mouth, and light gray eyes sharp as daggers. He reminded Lance of someone he knew.

"On the lam, eh, Madge? You certainly gave that driver of mine a run," he said with an air of cool effrontery.

"Hello, Bee. What do you mean—on the lam?" she replied.

"Trying to run away from me again."

"No. I was in a hurry to keep a date. I'm too late. He's come and gone. Damn old Fuzzy-Top! It was his fault."

"Was your date with Fuzzy-Top?"

"No. You don't seem to understand my college talk any better than I do your gangster expressions. Fuzzy is one of my profs."

Gangster! Lance sustained a sudden shock. So that was it! What could the girl possibly have to do with a gangster? Plenty, thought Lance, considering that she had the imperious look of one who had an insatiable thirst for adventure.

"Madge, I haven't said nothing yet," replied the fellow with a laugh. "Saying it with flowers is not my way. How about cocktails? Take me for a ride."

"Bee, I told you I had a date," she protested. "With a perfectly swell fellow. I'm crazy about him."

"Yeah? He doesn't seem so crazy about you. Dish the date and let's go places." With that the cool gentleman walked around the front of her car, and opening the door he slipped in and slammed it shut.

"You've got a nerve," she retorted.

"Didn't you tell me that was what you liked about me?"

"I suspect I did. You were something new, Bee."

"Thanks. You're a new twist on me. All women are flirts. But I went for you in a big way. And you went out with me, didn't you?"

"Yes. A couple of times. If you recall, I met you at the Grove one afternoon for tea. We danced. And one other time at the Biltmore, where we quarreled because you were pretty raw."

"Cooled on me, eh?"

"Not exactly. You still pack a thrill. But you're a little too—too—"

"Madge, no broad ever made a sucker of Bee Uhl yet," he rejoined with a crisp ring in his voice.

"Mr. Uhl, you're quite beyond me," said the girl with a smile that disarmed her aloofness. "I'm afraid you're going to make me regret my—well, shall we call it playful indiscretion? I never took you for a gentleman, but I thought you a good sport. If I'm not mistaken the favors of our little flirtation were yours. Where can I drop you?"

"Say, Beauty, you hate yourself, don't you? Well, I can take it. But the Honeybee is not through buzzing around yet— Let me off corner Seventh."

In another moment they were gone, leaving Lance in a queer state of mind. He hardly knew what to think, or why he had not made his presence known. Presently his romance burst like a pricked bubble. But his relief did not equal his regret. He would not be seeing Madge again. If her apparently friendly contact with a gangster had caused her to fall somewhat in his hasty estimation, that did not seem to

make any difference. A girl as beautiful as she was, radiant with such an intense and fatal charm, would have to go into a nunnery, or else expect a fall of Troy around her. No doubt she desired that very thing. Lance congratulated himself on his great good fortune in avoiding the meeting, yet when it was too late he wanted it otherwise.

In less than two hours Lance was riding Umpqua along the hilly back roads of Hollywood. He was on his way and saw the last of the town from a bridle path high upon a foothill. He knew every bit of soft road under the slope of the mountains and avoided the asphalt wherever possible. At nine o'clock, some 20 miles out of the city, he called it a day and sought lodgings for himself and Umpqua.

Up at dawn, he made San Bernardino by nightfall and, the next day, Banning. This entrance to the desert pass he welcomed as an event. From there on he could keep his horse almost altogether off the paved roads. That night Lance was so tired he went to sleep when his head touched the pillow. On the following morning he headed down San Gorgonio Pass toward the great gray valley of the southernmost California desert.

From that point he began a leisurely journey down the long sun-baked desert. Mecca, the Salton Sea, Niland were each marked by hitching up another hole in Umpqua's cinch. But the great horse, once off the automobile roads and loosened up by the heat, soon showed his sound bottom and his love of the open. He knew they were headed for new ranges.

Lance struck the five-mile stretch of sand dunes at sunrise, and he marveled at the odd, smooth mounds with their knifelike crests, the scalloped vales between the dunes, the opal hues changing and playing across the sands. Umpqua did not like this region where his hoofs sank to his fetlocks. The flinty levels beyond, black and red with polished gravel, the sparse tufts of greasewood and cactus, the volcanic peaks, and then finally the dusky arrowwood-bordered road to the Colorado River—these kept Umpqua on his free, easy ground-covering gait. Lance's first sight of the red river justified what he had anticipated—a sullen swirling muddy flood, inimicable to horse and rider. And Yuma at night struck Lance favorably, with its wide main street and bright lights, its giant Indians and stealthily stepping Mexicans. He was across the river and this was Arizona.

He had lost track of days and miles by the time he reached Florence. Tombstone, with its preserved buildings of a hard frontier past; Bisbee, with its great mines and bustle; Douglas, an enterprising and progressive town, marked Lance's long ride across southern Arizona. Lance meant to strike off the main highway and railroad somewhere beyond Douglas into the ever-increasing rugged grandeur and beautiful valleys of this Arizona land. But his money, which he had thought would hold out for a much longer period, had dwindled to almost nothing, and it was now necessary that he stop and look for work. He left Umpqua with a Mexican who owned a small place outside of town.

Lance accosted men in service stations and stores without any success. What he wanted to encounter was a cowboy. But this type appeared remarkably scarce. One man, evidently a cattleman, laughed gruffly at Lance; "Wal, son, thet kind of two-laigged critter has been aboot washed up on

this range."

That discouraged Lance, and he strolled around, slowly succumbing to the need of pawning his watch. Walking in high-heeled cowboy boots was not exactly a joy. It was noon and Lance was hot. Presently he heard voices near at hand, and turning, discovered that he had halted close to a big black car, from which issued sharp voices. A second glance at that car struck him singularly. How like the black car that had followed the girl Madge to the parking-place where he had chosen to avoid meeting her! With a pang he realized he had not thought of her for days. He was in another world. But this car! Shiny black, without a gleam of metal anywhere, a fine high-priced machine, it certainly resembled—

"Hey, buddy, come here," called a voice that shot through Lance. A young man, with pale face and eyes like gimlets, was leaning out of the front seat opposite the driver. Lance recognized him immediately. The young man Madge had designated as a gangster and who had called himself Honeybee Uhl.

Chapter Two

It's a Small World

LANCE advanced slowly, hiding an intense curiosity. Somehow he wanted to find out all he could about this fellow.

"Hello, yourself," he replied.

"You look sort of on the loose."

"Well, I look just what I am," Lance replied.

"No offense. We're loafing here for a guy, and I just wanted to be friendly. Care for a drink?"

"Not till I have a feed."

"Broke?"

"Flat as a pancake. And I can't find a job in this slow burg."

"Say, buddy, there's plenty jobs for the right guys. Can you drive a truck?"

"Mister, I could drive two trucks," retorted Lance boastfully.

"Yeah? Well, how'd you like to grab a century?"

"Uhuh! Sounds good to me. I'd pull almost any kind of a job for that much dough. Only I'd want to be sure I was going to get it," laughed Lance.

"Exactly. It's okay. Now who are you and what have you been doing?"

"You never heard of me, mister," said Lance evasively. "But I'll say I've been beating it from L.A."

"Dicks after you?"

Lance laughed grimly and looked blankly silent, and averted his face somewhat from the piercing scrutiny bent upon him.

"Come clean with me, buddy, if you want your luck to change. What you been doing in L.A.?"

"Are you asking me, mister?"

"Yes, I am. It's not for you to ask *me* questions," replied Uhl with impatient sharpness. "Take it or leave it."

"Aw, what the hell? I'm hungry— I beat it out of Portland ahead of Latzy Cork," hazarded Lance, remembering the name of a shady underworld character who had recently been eluding the police on the coast.

"That racket, eh?" flashed Uhl, snapping his fingers. And with his eyes like gray fire he turned in the seat to his companions. Lance took advantage of this moment to make certain that he would recognize the driver of the car, and the three hard-faced individuals in

the back seat, if he ever saw them again. At the side of the one farthest toward the road Lance espied the muzzle of a machine gun. "Cork may have been spotting me. What do you think, Dipper?"

"Not a chance, Bee. He's been in Frisco and north for two months," replied the one addressed.

"We don't know that," said Uhl doubtfully, and turning again he pulled out a roll of bills, the wrapper of which bore the denomination 100. "Here's your dough, buddy. You're on the spot. But the only risk you run is if you double-cross me."

"If I undertake the job, I'll be straight," interposed Lance.

"That's how you strike me. See the big canvas-covered truck across there, back of the service station? Well, she's your bus. You're to take her to Tucson. She's empty, but you drive slow, as if she was loaded heavy. See? You'll be held up sooner or later, probably after dark outside of Tucson. That'll be okay. You're dumb. You just drove the truck over; you don't know me. See?"

"You bet," declared Lance, taking the proffered money. "What'll I do when I get to Tucson?"

"You'll be on the main highway. Stop at the first service station on the edge of town. Right-hand side."

"Then what?"

"If I don't meet you someone else will. Buddy, if you turn this trick there'll be more."

"This one doesn't strike me so hot," declared Lance tersely. "But one at a time. I'm on my way."

As Lance strode off, carefully pocketing the money he heard Uhl say, "Dip, if he comes through we'll take him on."

"No gamble, Boss. That fellow will do—"

Lance passed on out of earshot. At the station he said to the operator, "That truck ready?" Upon being informed that "she's all set," Lance climbed into the driver's seat and took a look. The machine was a fine make. As he moved out of the station yard he observed that the big black car had gone. Lance did not look to see what had become of it.

A block away he turned into the highway and got through Douglas without a stop. Once beyond the town he opened up and faced the north with a grim realization that he was in for an adventure he never would have hazarded but for a blond college girl named Madge who had intrigued him.

Lance did not need to bring back the vision of her. That was limned on his memory. No use faking it, he thought —he had fallen in love with her at first sight. That was all right. But he wished the thought and beauty and charm of her would not stick so tenaciously. He could not banish her and again came the regret that he had not stood right out like a man to meet her that day. He could at least have spared her the encounter with Uhl.

All at once Lance had a disturbing thought. Uhl, gangster, racketeer, bootlegger, might have another slant to his crookedness. He might be a kidnaper. That seemed reasonable enough, and the idea grew on Lance. The girl must belong to a rich California family. Her style, her patrician air, her talk of a ranch full of Arabian horses, surely these attested wealth. And that might explain Uhl's interest in her. With the near approach of repeal of prohibition these bootleggers must work up other rackets. Already there had been a nationwide activity in kidnaping.

"Goofy or not, I take it as a hunch,"

muttered Lance with finality. "Believe me, I'll get a line on that slicker with his roll of centuries, if I can."

Driving a truck did not permit of close attention to the desert scenery, which had been his pleasure while riding Umpqua. However, that labor and his concentration on the peculiar circumstances leading to this ride, certainly made the time fly. Almost before he knew it, he was climbing the tortuous grade through Bisbee, keeping keen lookout for the holdup he had been told to expect. About midafternoon he went through picturesque Tombstone, on the outskirts of which he halted for gasoline. This necessitated his breaking the $100 bill Uhl had given him.

The service-station man, a Westerner of middle age, glanced from the bill to Lance with keen blue eyes. "Seen bills like this before—an' also that truck you're drivin'. How aboot yore company?"

"Don't savvy," returned Lance gruffly. "What you mean by company?"

"Wal, usually thar's two or three trucks like this one strung along. Reckon you're new to—"

"To just what, mister?" interrupted Lance.

"Wal, I ain't sayin'," responded the operator in cool evasion.

"Yeah? Well, as a matter of fact, I'm damn new at this job."

That little byplay roused Lance anew to the possibilities that might be thickening ahead of him. Thereafter he kept keen as a whip, increasing his speed a little. It was almost dark when he passed Mescal, a desert hamlet, and he did not halt to appease thirst or hunger. He wanted to get this job over. The desert night was soft and balmy, cooling as the radiation of the day's heat passed away. Jack rabbits and coyotes leaped across the road, gray in the flash of his lamps.

Some miles beyond Vail there appeared to come a brightening to the north. Soon Lance made that out to be the lights of Tucson, miles away still, but clear in the rarefied atmosphere. Lance, rolling along at 40 miles or more an hour, began to feel an edge for the expected holdup. Every time he caught the gleam of headlights behind he prepared for the order to halt. But so many cars passed him the next hour and so bright grew the illuminated horizon that he began to believe he might reach the first service station on the right without being stopped.

Presently a car came up behind and held its place for a couple of miles. Lance anticipated that this was the one, and he forced himself to be ready. He slowed down to 30, then to 20. The car kept behind him, somewhat to the left. At length it slipped up alongside Lance.

"Hey, you driver. Halt!" rang out a hoarse voice. Lance shut off, and applying the brakes, screeched to a stop.

"*Stick 'em up!*" came from the car. A flashlight blinded Lance.

"Okay!" he yelled, complying with the order.

Two men leaped out and a door clicked. The car moved on ahead to come to a standstill in front of the truck. Lance's door was jerked open. Light flooded his cab. Over an extended gun he caught indistinct sight of two faces

the foremost of which was masked. Lance heard footsteps running back behind his truck and the clank of bolts.

"Bud, j'ever see this one before?" queried the bandit with the gun.

"Nope. Another new one," came the laconic answer.

"Who are you?" followed the demand.

"Arizona cowpuncher," replied Lance. "Broke. Agreed to drive this truck."

"Who hired you?"

"I don't know. Five men in a black car at Douglas."

From behind clanked the hinge and there was a slap of canvas. "Empty, by God!" cried a hoarse voice, in anger. Footsteps preceded the appearance of two more men, one of whom Lance managed to distinguish despite the blinding flashlight. "Henny, we're tricked. He's made suckers out of us again. This truck is empty."

"Ah, hell no!"

"Aw, hell yes! It's a cattle car. As late as yesterday, when we picked them cars up, this one was full of steers. The other one had the—"

"Shut up!" yapped the leader, pounding his gun on the door. "Hey, driver, how many trucks like this have you lamped lately?"

"Off and on I've seen a good many," rejoined Lance glibly. "Three in a row day before yesterday."

"Goin' which way?"

"North, out of Douglas."

"Ah ha! I *told* you, Henny," yelled the enraged bandit. "An' they'll all come back full of steers. He's took to buyin' steers. What you think of that? In the cattle bizness. A blind. Ha! Ha! An' it made a sucker out of you."

"Driver, is there a short cut to El Paso without goin' through Douglas?" queried the leader sharply.

"Yes, at Benson," replied Lance readily. "Poor road, but passable."

The leader snapped off his flashlight. "Beat it, cowboy, wherever you're goin'. An' tell your boss we're onto his racket."

The run from that lonely stretch of road to the service station designated was accomplished in short order, Lance driving at a fast clip. The truck appeared to ooze along as smoothly as a limousine. Hardly had Lance come to a halt in the station yard when two men in dark garb, slouch hats pulled down, hurried out to meet him. Lance was ready for them, and opening the door he stepped out with a long *whew* of relief.

"Hello. Am I glad to see you? Take her away," he said vociferously.

"Dey stick you up?" queried one tensely, while the other leaped into the seat.

"You bet. About five miles out. You should have heard Bud and Henny cuss to find her empty. I gave them a bum steer."

"Yeah? An' how bum?"

"They asked me if there was a short cut to El Paso and I told them yes, at Benson. I heard it was some road. They'll get lost."

"Thet'll go hot with the boss. How much'd you dole out for gas? He forgot thet, an' told me to square it."

Lance named the sum, which was handed to him in a five-dollar note and no change wanted.

"Blick, have we got all night?" demanded the man in the driver's seat. "Cut it."

"Keep your shirt on. Honeybee gave me an order, didn't he? Driver, you come through clean. I'm to tell you that if you're hangin' round Douglas next

run, you can get another job."

"Swell. I'll hang around, if it's not too long. When's the next run?"

"I don't know. Mebbe in a month—mebbe longer."

When they had gone Lance went into the service station, aware that his arrival and the short conference had been observed.

"How far to a hash joint? I'm sure starved," he began genially.

"Stranger hereabouts?" the man returned, with a keen look. "Plenty grub places up the street."

"Thanks. Yes, I'm a stranger. And I don't mind telling you I drove that truck because I was broke. I was held up out here and scared stiff."

"You don't say. Well, that's not strange, considerin' the company. You got off lucky."

"Yeah? What was I up against?"

"Couldn't say."

"Did you ever see that truck before?"

"Yep, an' some more like it. They been comin' and goin' every six weeks or so."

"Cattle business must be good when steers get hauled in trucks," commented Lance; then waiting a moment for an answer, which did not come, he strode up the street. In the middle of the second block he found a café, where he obtained his supper. At the next corner there was a hotel. Inquiry brought the information that he could take a bus early next morning for Douglas. Then he went to bed. Events of the day had been thought-provoking, but they did not keep him awake.

On the bus the following morning, however, he had nothing to do but think. It took Lance practically all that long ride to reason out the futility of any further interest in Uhl. Lance did not want to drive any more questionable trucks. Aside from an interesting experience, this meeting with Uhl had no warrant to absorb him. It was the singular connection with the college girl that kept him wondering and conjecturing, and thinking that he should warn her somehow. But he did not even know her last name. And to go back to Los Angeles on such a fanciful assumption seemed absurd. Nevertheless his conscience bothered him.

When at Douglas he went out to see Umpqua, and quite provokingly conceiving a picture of Madge on his beautiful horse, he almost gave way to rage at his sentimentality. All the same, thought of the girl persisted, and Lance finally reconciled himself to being haunted.

Riding northeast from Douglas the Arizona desert land magnified its proportions of color and wildness and rugged grandeur to such a degree that Lance was loath to travel on and turn his back to ranges that dwarfed those he had ridden in Oregon. What a grand country he was entering! Ahead of him were mountains, peaked and lofty, purple in the distance, growing black and gray as league after league he neared them.

Lance took his time stopping to ask questions, but the several little hamlets along the way failed to yield much information. He spent one night at Chiricahua, which town appeared to be in the center of a vast green and gray range surrounded by mountains. He had begun to see cattle in considerable numbers, though not one hundredth as many as the country might have supported. He rode on and on over a rolling and lovely valley.

Darkness overtook Lance. He had inquired at Apache about towns farther north. He had been told they were few

and far between. It looked as though his preoccupation with the solitude and beauty of this upland valley was going to make him spend a night in the open. He did not mind that. The day had been hot and the night still remained warm. However, three hours after sunset he sighted lights ahead and soon entered a place called Bolton.

Unlike most of the other towns, this one appeared to be comparatively new and located on both highway and railroad. There was a wide main street with bright lights and many parked cars, stores and cafés, a hotel and an inn, a bank and motion-picture theater. Lance rode on through to the outer zone of garages and auto camps.

Umpqua, staunch as he was, had begun to tire. Lance was pleased to see several horses tethered beyond a garage off the main street, and next a livery stable. The garage, evidently, also provided the facilities of a service station and was quite modest compared to showy places Lance had passed.

"Howdy, cowboy," drawled a pleasant voice. "Git down an' come in."

"Hello, yourself," replied Lance, greeting a sturdy bowlegged young man who had appeared from somewhere. There was enough light to make out a lean tanned face from which shone narrow slits of eyes, keen and friendly.

"My Gawd! Where'd you steal thet hawss?" queried this individual.

"Are you kidding me or is that the way horsemen are greeted here?" asked Lance.

"Shore kiddin', cowboy. We got some grand hawsses in this country an' thet's why I got fresh. But on the level where *did* you find him?"

"Oregon-bred. He was given us when he was a colt. And I raised him."

"You from Oregon?" went on the other, walking around the horse in a way that betrayed a love of horseflesh.

"Yes, rode him all the way."

"Don't tell. I'll be doggoned! Wal, lookin' him over I ain't so surprised. All hawss, cowboy, an' I'd trade you my garage for him."

"Sounds cowboy," laughed Lance.

"Shore I was—I *am* a cowboy. Been ridin' Arizona ranges all my life. But these hard times I had to make a livin' for my mother an' me."

"Gee, that's bad news. I came to Arizona to find a job with some cattle outfit."

"Wal, you're jest outa luck. Cowboys air scarce these days. As scarce as jobs. Plenty of cattle all through heah. An' the outfits thinned down to two or three riders. My job for three years before this bust-up hit us was with Gene Stewart. Finest rancher in these parts. Used to run eighty thousand haid. But of late years Gene has lost out. An' as I couldn't ride no more for nothin' I had to take this place. Pays fair, but I just hate it."

"Don't blame you. How about me bedding down Umpqua in this livery stable?"

"*Umpqua?* What a name! Where'n hell did you git thet?"

"It's Indian. Name of a river in Oregon. Means swift."

"Swell handle at thet. Shore, this stable is okay. I'll go in with you. What'd you say your name was? Mine's Ren Starr."

"I didn't say yet. It's Lance Sidway."

"Air you gonna hang about heah a spell?"

"Yes, if I can find work."

The livery-stable man turned out to be an old fellow with an unmistakable cattle-range air about him. He was al-

most as enthusiastic over Umpqua as Starr had been. For the first time in a long while Lance began to feel at home with his kind.

"Ump, old boy, this barn smells good, doesn't it?" said Lance, and giving his pet a parting smack, he went out with Starr. "Where can I eat and sleep?"

"Several places, but outside the hotel, you'll like Mrs. Goodman's café. Nice woman, dotes on cowboys, an' runs a swell little chuck house."

"Won't you come with me? I'd like to talk."

"Wal, shore. I've had my supper. But I can always eat. An' it's closin' time for my place anyway."

Presently Lance was ushered into a clean fragrant little shop, with more of a homey than a café look, and introduced to a portly woman of kind and genial aspect. Evidently she had a warm spot in her heart for cowboys.

"Wal, Oregon, I'd shore like to see you stop heah," said Starr eagerly. Manifestly he had taken to Lance as Lance had to him.

"All the way up from Apache I've liked the range more and more."

"Hell, this ain't nothin'. You ought to see thet range down along the west slope of the Peloncillo Mountains. Swell deer an' antelope huntin'. Bear an' cougar up high. Trout fishin', oh boy! Grass an' sage ranges."

"Sounds more than swell. Is that where your Gene Stewart runs cattle?"

"Used to, when he had ten outfits. But now he's only got about a thousand haid left, not countin' yearlin's an' calves. He jest lets them graze around his ranch, with a couple of Mexican kids ridin' for him."

"How far away is his ranch?"

"I reckon about thirty by trail. The road runs round an' up an' down. Cars register forty-two miles. No road work this spring makes tough goin', an' I don't mean mebbe."

"Wonder what chance I'd have getting on with him? Wages no object for a while. I want to ride open country, and have a square meal often, with pasture for Umpqua. You see, he was raised to fare for himself. Alfalfa and grain would spoil him."

"My idee of trainin' a hawss right. I'll tell you, Sidway, there's a pretty shore chance for you out with Gene. He needs riders most damn bad. I'll give you a note to him in the mawnin'. Thet'll cinch it, if you really want a job for nothin' 'cept board. He'll be glad. Only you gotta approach him sorta careful. Sensitive fellow, Gene is, but the salt of this range. For two bits I'll sell out an' go with you."

"That'd be swell. Why don't you?"

"It'd be all right with Mom. She wants to get out of this hot country for a while. But I'm makin' money an' I reckon I ought to save plenty before hittin' the trail again."

"All right, Ren. Thanks for the hunch. I'll go. Maybe we can see each other sometimes. I'd like that."

"Me too. Shore we can. Gene would give you a Sunday off now an' then. I'd run out after you."

"What kind of ranch does Stewart own?"

"Gee whiz! I reckoned every puncher in the West had heahed of it. Close to the border. Used to belong to a Mexican named Don Carlos. He was shot long before I come to this part of Arizona. I was hardly borned then. But I've heahed the story. Durin' the Mexican Revolution around twenty-five years ago Don Carlos had thet ranch. It was a Spanish grant. An' he was sellin' contraband along the border. Gene

Stewart was a tough cowboy them days. Great with the rope an' hawss—a daid shot—an' nerve, say! they didn't come no cooler than thet *hombre.* Wal, he joined up with the revolutionists. They called him *El Capitan.*

"After Madero was assassinated Gene come back heah. About thet time a rich girl from Noo York come along. She bought Don Carlos's Ranch. Still-well, the foreman then, corralled the hardest bunch of cowboys thet ever rode a range. But nobody could boss them until he put Gene on the job. They run Don Carlos an' his band off the range. An' they made thet ranch the finest in the West. It's as beautiful as ever, but turrible run down these last two years— Wal, Gene married his boss, the rich girl from the East, an' was thet a romance!"

"Darned interesting, Ren. I'm going to like Stewart."

"You shore will, an' if you turn out as good as you look—excuse me bein' personal—Gene is goin' to cotton to you. He was grand to me. An' I just love him as if he was my dad. He always stops in to see me, hopin' I'll come back. But he never says so. He was in town today, worried plain about somethin'. He said it was only 'cause he was losin' a few cattle."

"Cattle thieves?" exclaimed Lance quickly.

"Shore. There's still some rustlin' all over. Nothin' heah like it used to be. But you see a dozen haid to Gene now means more'n a thousand, years ago. He was sore because he couldn't find out how the cattle was stole. An' old Nels, the last of thet great outfit of cowboys, couldn't find out either."

"Too old-fashioned, maybe."

"Doggone, Sid. I had thet very idee."

"Say, Starr," spoke up Lance, as if with an inspiration, "not so many days ago I drove a big truck from Douglas to Tucson. It was empty but it had been full of steers."

Lance related briefly the circumstances that made it necessary for him to earn some money, but he did not go into detail about the men he had met on that adventure.

"Wal, I'm a son-of-a-gun! What kind of a truck?"

"A big one, fine make, and canvas-covered. I took the license number and the name of the owner. Which I suspect is not the name of the right owner."

"Sidway, you're sayin' things," rejoined Starr, growing cool after his excitement. "I've seen three or four trucks like thet one pass heah every month or so. One went through north four days ago."

"Did you pay any particular attention to it?"

"No. Only saw it an' was sore as usual 'cause the driver got gas from one of the other stations. You see them fellers never have bought a gallon of gas from me. Thet's okay, shore. My place is as you saw it."

"Starr, they passed you up because you were a cowboy."

"You don't say! Thet's an idee. A hot one."

"Something I heard on my drive gives me a hunch now that these truck men bought cattle as a blind. Perhaps of late they *steal* cattle. All kinds of business pretty punk these days."

"Pard, you're a whiz," ejaculated Starr intensely. "Rackin' my haid, I figger thet I haven't seen them trucks go through heah *southbound* since last fall. They do go through, shore. I been told thet. But late in the night."

"We got something to work on."

"I should smile. I'll grow curious as hell. Sid, this heah is goin' to be most damn interestin' to Gene!"

After an early breakfast next morning Lance made his first Arizona purchases, which consisted of a new riding-outfit, and a much needed shaving-kit and several other articles. His discarded things he tied in his old coat, so that he could carry the bundle conveniently on his saddle. When he presented himself at Starr's garage, that worthy stared in comical surprise.

"Mawnin', Sid," he drawled. "What you been about? All dolled up. My Gawd! I hadn't no idee you was such a handsome galoot. On thet hawss you'll knock 'em cold."

"I needed some clean duds and a shave," explained Lance. "Couldn't ask for a job looking like a tramp."

"I ain't so shore, Sid," returned Starr doubtfully. "Gene likes 'em tough. Why, with thet red scarf an' all you look like a cowboy movie star."

"Ren, I bought the least gaudy outfit that storekeeper had," protested Lance. "If you think I should change back to—"

"Aw, I was half kiddin'. You look okay. In fact you look grand. But no cowpuncher can fool Gene Stewart. He'll see right through you, Sid. An' I'll bet my shop he'll take to you same as I did. Heah's your note to Gene. I shore hope you turn out half as good as my recommendation."

"Thanks, Ren. I hope I make good. Now tell me how to find this wonderful ranch."

"Go out the highway, south, of course. Take the first road—it's a dirt road—turnin' left. Stick on thet for about five miles, till you come to a bridge over a crick. Lots of green willows. Anyway, it's the first bridge you come to, so you cain't miss it. There's a trail thet follers the crick, on the right-hand side. Hit thet trail, pard, an' good luck to you."

"How'll I know the ranch when I come to it?"

"Hell! it's the only ranch out there. The house, old Spanish style, sets on a knoll among trees. Walls used to be white. But you can see it from the divide, ten miles away."

In very short order Lance was out of Bolton on a road that seemed to climb and lose itself in gray obscurity. Umpqua, scenting something out there, the sage and the open, perhaps, settled down to his fast ground-gaining trot.

By noonday Lance calculated that he had covered at least 20 miles, two-thirds of the distance to Stewart's ranch, and soon he had surmounted the divide Starr had mentioned. The scene was so splendid that Lance halted to gaze and gaze spellbound. He saw a moving dust line from a car creeping across this vast gray-purple bowl under him which must be the southern end of Bernardino Valley. Rocky areas and clumps of cedars and darker patches of trees relieved the monotony of that range, sweeping away and upward to the mountains that must be the Peloncillos.

Then Lance's keen eyes sighted the forested knoll and the old Spanish mansion built by Don Carlos. Ten miles away still, it appeared to stand out with a magnificence that Starr had hinted of. A lake, blue as a gem, shone in the sun, and its circle of green let out a branch that wound down across the gray, to make a wide bend around the rocky ridge Lance had surmounted.

By midafternoon Lance rode into a pretty little Mexican village at the foot of the knoll. Columns of blue smoke

arose slowly. The half-naked children, the burros and dogs, the natives in colored raiment watching idly from the low porches, all appeared to have a leisurely air. Lance ventured a question to one group. An exceedingly pretty Mexican girl, whose large black eyes shone bright and roguishly upon Lance replied to him, "*Buenos dias, señor.*"

"No savvy. Can't you talk United States?" asked Lance mildly, smiling at the girl.

"Yes, cowboy, Mr. Stewart is home."

"Thank you, *señorita.* I think I'm going to like it here."

Her dusky eyes snapped with mischief, and quick as their flash she retorted, "It didn't take you long, *señor.*"

Lance had not proceeded beyond where the road turned up the wooded knoll when a boy overtook him to inform him that *Señor* Stewart was at the corrals, toward which he pointed. Lance threw him a quarter, and kept to the right along the base of the knoll, to come at length into view of log barns and sheds and corrals, a long mossy-roofed bunkhouse, old and weathered, picturesquely falling to decay. A piercing whistle from an unseen horse brought a snort from Umpqua.

Lance rode down a lane of tumbledown poles, to turn into a kind of court, at the immediate right of which stood a blacksmith shop; in front of this were several Mexican riders, and a thoroughbred black horse so glossy and well-groomed that he did not appear to belong there.

Then a tall man stepped out from behind the horse. He had a superb build, a dark intent face, deeply lined, piercing dark eyes, and there was white hair over his temples. Lance did not need to be told that this was Gene Stewart. As Lance rode up he caught first a relaxing of this stern face into a smile that warmed it attractively, and then a keen interest in both rider and horse.

"Howdy, cowboy," the rancher greeted Lance in a pleasant deep voice. "You got the jump on them."

"Who—what?" stammered Lance. "Are you Gene Stewart?"

"Yes, I'm Stewart. And who're you?"

"Lance Sidway. I want a job."

"Fine. May I ask if you have been recommended by my daughter?"

"No—indeed, sir," replied Lance. "I don't know your daughter."

"Indeed? Well, then I'll listen."

"Here's my letter of introduction," went on Lance, producing it.

Stewart opened and read it, suddenly to beam upon Lance. "Pard of Starr's, eh? You sure can't be all Ren says. But if you're anyways near as good—"

"Excuse me, Stewart," interposed Lance hurriedly. "I'm not sailing under false colors. Starr doesn't know me any better than you do. Met him only last night! We liked each other right off. He told me you might take me on. Offered a letter of introduction."

"I see. That's like Ren. Get down and come in."

Lance stepped out of the saddle to drop the bridle. Stewart spoke to one of the admiring native lads: "Pedro, water him and rub the dust off him. Cowboy, you've a grand horse. I can't see a fault in him. Any rancher in the West would give you a job to get a chance to buy him or steal him."

"Umpqua is swell," replied Lance, as the rancher led him to a seat on the porch of what appeared to be a store.

"Nels, come out," called Stewart, into the wide-open door of the old

building. Receiving no answer he said plaintively, "Nels must be out back with my daughter, looking at her horses. Cowboy, you'll have hell keeping that horse."

"Oh, I see," laughed Lance, thrilled at the intimation that the rancher might take him on. "Any girl who loves horses would want Umpqua, naturally. But she'll have to take me with him."

"Old-time cowboy spirit! I was that way, once— Where you from?"

Lance briefly told of his home in Oregon, his experience on the ranges there, modestly enumerating his abilities and skipping the Hollywood experience.

"Did you ever hear of this range and my ranch?"

"Only from Starr. It'd be a great place to work. Please give me a trial, Stewart. I'll be glad to work for my board."

"Sidway, I couldn't let you work for nothing."

"But sir, if it's money don't let that keep you from hiring me," importuned Lance.

"Tell me straight. I'll like you the better if you confess you want this job on account of Madge."

"Madge!—Who's she? Oh, of course, your daughter— Mr. Stewart, on my honor I swear I never heard of her until Starr raved about her last night."

"Don't perjure yourself. Girls are always cowboys' troubles— I'll take you on, Sidway, and pay you a few dollars a month till the cattle business looks up."

"Thank you. I'll sure do my best for you."

"Did Ren mention he might come back to me?"

"Yes, he did. He wants to. I'll bet he'll come, soon as he saves a little more money."

"I hate to ask him. But with you hard-riding youngsters to help me and Danny and my *vaqueros* we might save the herd. You see, Sidway, there's been some queer rustling—"

Stewart was interrupted by a sweet high-pitched voice that came from round the corner of the porch, down the lane.

"*Nels!* For Pete's sake look at this black horse! Oh, what a beauty!—Oh! Oh!"

Clinking spurs attested to the slow steps of a rider.

"Well, lass, I never set eyes on thet hawss before," drawled a quaint voice. "You'll shore hate me when I say he's got yore nags beat to a frazzle."

"Nonsense!—But he *is*— Nels, I want him. I'll have him if it costs ten thousand. Dad! *Dad!*"

Stewart whispered, "Step around and tell her here's one horse she can't buy. It'll be fun."

"Certainly, sir," replied Lance dubiously. It was his first order from his boss. Besides he seemed curiously struck by the situation or that sweet voice. As he moved to the corner he heard pattering footsteps. Then a vision flashed into sight to plump squarely into his arms.

"Oh!" she screamed, and staggering, would have fallen had she not caught Lance with swift hand. A girl—bareheaded—her golden hair flying—lovely flushed face, strangely familiar—violet eyes widening, darkening! "Who on earth? *You!* Of all the miracles! If it isn't my hero!"

Lance recognized her. His girl of the campus adventure and the mad ride through the streets of Los Angeles. As she enveloped him, with gay trill, and

her red lips came up nearer to meet his in a cool sweet kiss, his breast seemed to cave in.

Chapter Three

Majesty's Homecoming

IT WAS along about sunset when Gene Stewart drove into the courtyard of his ranch.

Nels, the old Texan who was the last of his great riders of an earlier and wilder day, sat on the porch of the store, smoking and waiting. Nels must be close to 70 now. And all the West showed its life and havoc under that mild mask of tranquility.

"Wal, you're late, Gene, an' come draggin' along like you was on a bogged hawss," remarked Nels.

"Yes, old-timer," replied Gene wearily, as he sat down on the porch, a folded newspaper in his hand.

"What's on yore chest?"

"Things have gone from bad to worse, Nels."

"Heahed from Majesty?" queried the old cowman eagerly.

"Letter and telegram to me. More for Madeline. Madge is on her way home. For good!"

"You don't say? Aw! Then nothin' can be bad," replied Nels, settling back with an air of beautiful relief.

"Bad news from Madge, Nels. But let that go for the moment. There are lesser evils. Lawson has gone into bankruptcy. No hope of the money he owes me. I had banked on that. My creditors are pressing. Money must be raised."

"Any better market for cattle?"

"Gone down to thirty dollars on the hoof."

"Boss, I reckon I'd sell."

"All the herd?" queried Gene in surprise. Nels would be the last cattleman to sacrifice all his stock. There was not in Arizona a keener judge of matters pertaining to cattle.

"Every horn an' hide, Gene."

"But that is an unheard-of thing for a rancher to do," protested Stewart.

"Shore. How aboot these times? Onheard of, ain't they? Never in my life have I seen the like. Lookin' far ahaid, Gene, I'll predict thet the day of the big cattleman is over. I've got a hunch."

"I always respected your hunches, Nels," replied Stewart testily. "But this seems preposterous."

"Gene, jest how bad in debt air you?"

"I haven't the nerve to figure it up," replied Stewart evasively.

"Wal, if you sold oot at thirty you could pay up, an' then tide over ontil good times come again. If we live thet long!"

"I might consider selling half my stock," rejoined Stewart thoughtfully.

"You're the boss. An' you asked my opinion. I forgot to tell you thet Danny Mains rode up today. He ain't makin' oot with his cattle raisin'. Been losin' too many steers. An' Danny is afeared thet the Mexicans air doin' the stealin'."

"But how could a few Mexicans, even if they were crooked, get rid of cattle without leaving any sign?"

"I don't know, Gene. But there's shore somethin' doin'. All of Bonita's relatives cain't be good. Some of them won't be good until they're daid. Danny's got a fine wife in Bonita, an' shore a dandy girl in their daughter, young Bonita. But thet's aboot all. And he's scared of her relatives. Asked me plumb oot what to do."

"And what'd you say, Nels?"

"Wal, I told him to sell. An' when he bucked on thet I advised him to throw in with you. Then if you hired a couple of good cowhands we could beat this game. At least the stealin' end. Thet's the profit-eatin' cussed part of it."

"Not a bad suggestion, Nels. But what'd we pay hired cowhands with?"

"Aw, shucks, Gene! It cain't be thet bad with you," complained Nels plaintively.

"I'm sorry, old-timer. But it *is*. I hate to face Madeline. And especially with this." Stewart unrolled the newspaper he had twisted in his hands and spread it over the old cowman's knees. Nels took out his glasses, and adjusting them he read slowly:

COLLEGE CAMPUS RIOT

CO-ED EXPELLED FOR INCITING RIOT BETWEEN STUDENTS AND POLICE

"Wal, I'll be—!" he ejaculated, jerking up his fine white head. Gene had seen those blue eyes flash fire many a time, though hardly ever like this.

"*Majesty?*"

"Yes, I'm damn sorry to say."

"Gene, I'd give sómethin' to throw a gun on the cuss who wrote thet. He's a damn liar!"

"Who? The writer of this article?"

"Yes. I don't believe a word of thet dirty part. Aboot her bein' wild, rich, an' as hard a drinker as she was a speed demon. Gene, don't you believe thet an' fer Gawd's sake, don't tell Madeline."

"I'm sort of sunk, Nels. Kind of a last blow. I don't know what to think. Madge's letter admits it. Honest, right out! And her telegrams say she's on the way home to stay."

"Gosh! Thet's the best news I've heahed fer a long time."

"It is good news, Nels. It hurts, though. Looks kind of like disgrace is responsible."

"Aw no, Gene. Why, Majesty loves this range, this house where she was born. It's home."

"I don't know my own girl," sighed Stewart. "Remember, Nels, I haven't laid eyes upon Madge for over three years. You know I was in Mexico the last time she came home. And the summer before that she went to Europe."

"Wal, I have. An' I'm gamblin' on her, Gene. Wild as a young filly, shore she was. But good as gold an' as true as steel. When she was heah last I had some jars, you bet. I had to figger oot thet times had changed since you an' me ran after girls. We've stayed right in one spot, Gene, an' this old world has moved on."

"Right. I'll bet you we have it coming to us. Madge said in her letter she was having a crowd of college friends come to visit her."

"Fine. She did thet last time an' I never had such fun."

Gene slowly walked up the winding green-bordered path toward the ranch house. Passing through the high archway at the rear of the house, he entered the patio. It appeared a dusky jungle of dark verdure, running water, drowsy twittering of sleepy birds, and odorous fragrance. A savory smell wafted from the kitchen where he heard the servants talking in their low voices. When Gene crossed the wide porch to enter Madeline's sitting-room, the newspaper to which Nels had objected did not show among the large quantity of mail. Madeline had heard his step on the porch and had come to meet him.

"Gene!" she exclaimed, kissing him.

"A whole day late! You look tired—worried."

"Howdy, Madeline," replied Gene, laying the bundles and packets of mail on the table. "Yes, I'm tired—and worried. Bad news, wife. It never rains but it pours. Lawson failed, Madeline. Gone into bankruptcy. No hope of money. I'll have to sell some stock. Nels advises selling all my herd. That's nothing though. I've got a big surprise for you. Madge is coming home."

"Madge! Coming home? Why? What has she done now, Gene?" rejoined Madeline quietly.

"Got herself expelled from college," Gene blurted out, knowing that he should have broken the news more gently, but incapable of the guile necessary to spare his wife's feelings.

"Oh, no! Not on the eve of her graduation? June eleventh."

"Yes. It's tough, but maybe not so bad as it seems. Here's her letter and telegrams to me. Read them before you open yours."

Gene went into his office, which adjoined the sitting-room, turned on the lights, and laid all his unopened mail and some business papers upon his table. Then he repaired to his room to wash and change for the evening meal. He took plenty of time about this, his thoughts under the dominance of gloom. Presently Madeline called him to supper, and he found her in the dining-room. If he had expected her to be cast down he was agreeably surprised.

"I ought to be hungry," he said. "Most forgot to eat in town." And he asked Madeline questions pertaining to the ranch during his absence. Nothing had happened. The drowsy languorous summer had come and the tranquil tenor of the lonely range land had not been broken. When Gene had finished a hearty meal he suggested that they go into the sitting-room and get it over.

"Dear, it will never be over until you change your habit of mind," she replied sweetly. "You always look upon the dark side."

"Madeline, I could take my losses without— But it's yours that distress me. All your life you have had luxury. You were born to it. This last year and more you've been using your money to pad Madge's bank account. She keeps overdrawing her income and you keep from telling her that her income isn't one with what it was. Now through me and that spendthrift girl of ours you must suffer. When the depression hit us you should have told Madge the truth. How much her income had fallen off. Instead of that you never told her—made up the difference yourself. And she spends hundreds like a drunken cowboy does dollars. That is what hurts me."

"Gene, I expected the shrinking of capital and income would be only temporary. I still believe, as my lawyer in New York assures me, that we will recover. Madge's capital is intact and eventually her income will grow normal. That was a wise provision of Aunt Helen's. Madge can't spend the capital. And it doesn't make so great a difference that her income has dwindled. But now we should tell her—if we have the courage!"

"We!" expostulated Gene, startled. "Not much. Why, I don't know Madge since she grew up. When she was seventeen—before she left for college I was scared to death of her. You'll have to tell her."

"That'll be hard. I'm afraid myself of these years she has lived away from us. If I had it to do over I'd not have

sent her away to college."

"Well, let's forget the financial side of it for the present. You read her letters and telegrams?"

"Yes. Madge asked me to reserve judgment until I had heard her side. Evidently she became involved in some kind of a college row, for which she was not responsible, but which resulted in her expulsion. She regretted greatly that she could not graduate."

"Madeline, it—it'll be so wonderful to see her again that I almost don't care what she's done," replied Gene with emotion.

"Gene, it will all come out right."

"Sure it will, dear. I'm an old croaker. Wish I could be like Nels. You'll want to read your mail. And I've a lot of papers to look over."

In the morning there had come a change. Whether or not the anticipated homecoming of Madge had wrought the magic or a vivid realization of the sweetness of life on this glorious June morning, so rich in song of birds and blaze of purple range and golden sun, Gene did not know. A good sleep and then the light of day always worked wonders.

Gene found Danny Mains with Nels, having a cup of coffee in the old cowboy's bachelor quarters which had been his home for 25 years. Danny had been one of Gene's wild outfit in those long-past prosperous days. His bowlegs, his sturdy build had not altered. But Danny's homely visage betrayed the havoc of the years.

"Howdy, Boss," he greeted Gene gladly. Danny had not worked for Gene for a whole decade and more, but he always addressed him in the cowboy vernacular of rider to his employer. "I was comin' up. Nels an' me hev been talkin' over my throwin' in with you. I like the idee, Boss. Are you goin' to sell some stock?"

"Good morning, you two old *hombres*," replied Gene cheerfully. "Yes, I'm selling two-thirds of my cattle. What's your angle on that, Danny?"

"Like it, Boss. If the price is goin' up, as Nels figgers, why by the time we can round up an' drive to the railroad it ought to reach thirty-five dollars a haid."

"Shore it will," drawled Nels as he sipped his coffee. "Danny figgers he has aboot seven hundred haid, probably more. An' he aims to sell half of them."

"Boss, with a lot fewer cattle we can keep count better an' mebbe stop this queer rustlin'."

"Who's doing it?" demanded Gene angrily.

"I'm damned if I know. I'm shore afeared, though, thet some of my wife's lazy kin are mixed up in it some way."

"Ahuh. So Nels said. That ought to be easy to correct."

"Yes? How'n hell can I hang her relatives?"

"Danny, we don't need to hang them. Just stop them."

"An' you knowin' greasers for thirty years! Gene, we're growin' dotty in our old age."

"Let's pull out of it, Danny."

"I'll drink on thet."

"Nels, I can see you've got it all figured out for us. Spring it pronto."

"Mighty simple to me," rejoined Nels thoughtfully. "Hire a couple of rattlin' good cowboys. An' with you an' Danny an' the *vaqueros* heah you can do the job in a week."

"Hire two good cowboys, eh? Where? How? What with?" queried Gene, spreading wide his hands.

"Wal, I've an idee," went on Nels. "Gene, you an' Danny open the store while I clean up heah."

Gene took the key with its buckskin string attached, and accompanied by Danny went out by the long-deserted bunkhouse, across the green toward the store. He could hear the whistling of Madge's horses beyond the corrals.

"Danny, I'd closed up this store long ago but for Nels," said Gene.

"Aw, Boss, you can't do thet. Why, it'd kill the old feller. An' the store ain't runnin' at a loss, is it? All the Mexicans deal with Nels."

"Yes, and they owe him plenty. He must restock. And I just can't go deeper in debt."

"Hell no! We'll do somethin', Boss. I'm afraid we're down in the mouth. As if I didn't hev enough to pester me without thet girl of mine!"

"Bonita?" queried Gene quickly, with a chord of sympathy.

"Yes, Bonita. Boss, I'm damned ashamed to confess it, but I'm afeared she's a no-good little hussy. After all your wife has done for Bonita—educatin' her—makin' a lady out of her—why, she's jest cussed."

"Danny, what do you mean?"

"Bonita has the *vaqueros* nutty. But she doesn't give a damn for one of them. She's white an' she runs with the white. Ren Starr, you know, was turrible stuck on Bonita. But her flirtin', mebbe wuss, I don't know, queered her with him. She goes to town every chanct thet comes along. She drinks an' Lord knows what. I ought to beat the hell out of her. But I jest can't. I love thet kid like I loved her mother, Bonita, long ago. You remember, Gene, 'cause you saved Bonita for me."

Gene unlocked the rickety door of the old supply store and threw it open. The shelves were almost bare. Some print goods, gaudy in color, and glass jars of pink and yellow candy, and gewgaws for children, and a spare supply of tobacco and cigarettes were about all the stock left for Nels. In the wintertime he sat beside the old stove, to smoke his pipe, and feed billets of wood to the fire, and to talk about the past when, at rare intervals, somebody dropped in.

"Always makes me think we're living in the past," said Gene, coming out to join Danny.

"Aw, Boss, don't talk as if it was all over," returned Danny. "We got a future."

At that juncture Nels appeared behind him, his free clinking stride belying his white locks. As he was about to step up on the porch he halted, his keen blue gaze fixed beyond the village, far down on the range.

"Look!"

Gene sighted a streak of yellow dust tailing out behind a motorcar. His heart swelled up in his throat to check his utterance.

"Nels, have you a field glass handy?"

"Don't need none, Gene. Thet's Majesty!" rang out Nels.

"*Madge!* Say, can you see? Or is it one of your hunches?"

"Both— Look at thet car streak along! Gene, it shore ought to make you feel as young as it does me."

Nels had walked to the end of the porch. Gene could make out only the streaking dust-comet, blurred in his sight. Yet that appeared to grow magically closer.

"Gene, she's off the wust of the road. Be heah in a few shakes of a lamb's

tail. It's a low open car—shiny—with a long front—a nose like them stag-hounds Madeline used to have."

Presently car and rising dust disappeared under the slope.

"Heah thet drone? All the same airplane," shouted Danny.

Gene heard and thought that his ears had never drunk in such sweet music. Madge—his kid—his little girl—his second Madeline—come home for good! He heard Danny babbling in his old cowboy manner, and then Nels let out a "Kiyi!" The drone gave place to hum and then a mellow roar. Then like a flash a tan car shot into sight, passed the village, to turn left at the fork of the road, and speed out of sight up the knoll into the green foliage.

"Shore, I oughta reckoned on thet," said Nels to himself.

"Boss, I'll be waitin' home when you come down," added Danny. "Welcome Majesty home fer me."

"Nels, I think I'll go up."

"Wal, I should smile. Tell her my heart ain't as strong as it used to be," drawled Nels.

That jest in earnestness troubled Gene Stewart as he made his way up the knoll. The years were flying by. This homecoming of his daughter seemed to mark an epoch in his life and Nels's too. The old cowboy had no kin; he did not remember his age and he could not have worshiped Madge more if she had been his own. Gene fought a disloyal and disturbing thought about Madge. If she turned out to be wild and flighty, undutiful! But he conquered the incipient fear. As a child she had been warmhearted, loving, imperious and willful as her mother had been.

Gene expected to find Madge bewildering, and he walked slowly up the shady path, seeking to prepare himself for he knew not what. His steps, however, led him inevitably up to the house, through the great arch into the patio and on toward the east wing. Before he stepped into the flagstone corridor he heard a strange voice, swift and high-pitched, sweet and happy. That would be Madge. She was with her mother in the living-room. Gene took some long strides to reach the wide doorway. He saw Madeline in her big armchair with the girl on her lap.

"Mom, darling, I am wild with joy to be home. I have forgotten nothing. I am drunk with the sage. I am—"

And then Gene stepped into the room. They heard his step. The girl raised a lovely face, flushed and radiant, with great violet eyes that were wet and dim. Gene knew her, yet he did not know her. This Madge had golden hair.

"*Dad!*" she cried poignantly.

"Yes—if you are—Madge," he replied, a little huskily.

She sprang up, taller than he remembered her, and not so slim, to rush at him, arms spread. She threw them around his neck, and swinging free of the floor she hugged him tight. "My handsome Dad! My *El Capitan!* Oh, how—good to see—you!" And with kisses and incoherent words she at last let down her feet, to lean upon him breathlessly. As Gene gazed down, his breast congested and his utterance clogged, he saw that her long dark lashes lay upon her cheeks, and tears were streaming from under her lids.

"Madge, is—is it really you? I recognize your eyes, your look, your smile. All else is strange—especially *this*." And he caressed a waving tress of her golden hair.

"Mom said almost the same," rejoin-

ed Madge with a laugh. "Both of you have forgotten your darling."

"Not much," said Gene.

"Madge, once your hair was chestnut, like mine before it darkened," added her mother.

"Well, honey bunches, we will waive that question. But really I am disappointed. I was sure you'd fall for me hard."

"Daughter, if you are one hundredth as good as you are lovely, I shall be the happiest father in all the West."

"Dad! Don't look so wistful. Oh, how I have neglected you both! But you wanted me educated. You've had your way. I am, and how!"

"You will stay home with us—at least once in a while?" asked her mother.

"Forever, darling. I will have my friends come to see me. I wired you to expect a crowd after graduation. What a place this ranch is to entertain city tenderfeet! I'll have the time of my life."

"Madge, the ranch—is run down," said Gene hesitatingly. "Hardly fit now for your friends."

"But, Dad, it's so western, so Spanish. I adore the atmosphere of years and leisure. Before I left L.A., I bought three truckloads of stuff. Everything under the sun. Mom, I hope you like my modernistic taste. I'll refurnish my rooms, and all those in the west wing. Oh, it'll be swell."

"Only three truckloads!" ejaculated Gene, with a smile at Madeline. He had to laugh. His daughter was amazing, electrifying. He felt shot through and through with new life. The flush on Madeline's lovely face was pleasant to behold. "What about your baggage?"

"My car outside is full. And I expressed ten trunks and a lot of bags. They will be at Bolton today. The other stuff comes by freight. I do hope soon. We have only two weeks to get ready for my crowd."

Whereupon Gene left mother and daughter and proceeded to the room Madeline and he used as an office, and there he read neglected mail, carefully studied books and figures that always were Greek to him, and wrote some important letters. Madge's coming had seemed to fire his energy, to make a break in the old *mañana* habit of mind he had fallen into, and to stimulate his determination to see this climax of hard times through. To Gene's surprise he was called to lunch before he had any idea the morning had passed.

Madge met him as he entered the living-room, and he halted in sheer amazement. She looked like a slim boy.

"Madge, what kind of a riding-outfit is that?" Evidently his reaction to her appearance gave her delight.

"Dad, I have on slacks. Don't you like them?"

"Daughter, I'm afraid I'll like anything you wear," he replied, putting his arm around her.

"Against your better judgment, yes?"

They entered the dining-room, which appeared brighter than for many years. The sunshine sifted through the foliage over the open window. There were roses and Indian paint-brushes and sage in the vases. Madeline had celebrated the occasion by gracing the table with white linen and some of her old silver and china.

"Swell to be home!" exclaimed Madge.

"Disappointed in—anything?" asked Gene haltingly.

"Not a thing. The ranch had gone

to hell when I was home last. But I didn't mind the tumble-down corrals and sheds. Fits the range. But the big barn must have a new roof— Dad, it gave me a shock to see Nels. I think he has failed a little. But he is the same old darling. I was so overjoyed to see him that I forgot my horses. Fancy that? Then the luncheon bell rang. I had scarcely time to change. This afternoon I'll get into riding-togs, just to please Nels. What do you think he said, Dad? 'Wal, Majesty, the only things aboot this heah ranch thet ain't gone daid is yore hawsses. Me an' yore *vaqueros* hev seen to thet.' Oh, I love to hear the old Texan talk."

"Yes, your horses are okay, Madge," replied Gene. "I hope Nels didn't talk too much."

"He couldn't keep anything from me. Dad, I've known for a couple of years that your financial situation was not so hot. Mom told me when I was home last. And of course I've read about the depression going from bad to worse. Just how bad is it for you?"

Madge's direct query and the gaze that added more to it were not easy to meet.

"Pretty tough, Madge—but I'd rather not confess just what a poor businessman your dad is."

"Gene, it is not your management of the ranch," interposed Madeline. "You made it pay expenses until the bottom dropped out of everything."

"Madeline, that's darn good of you," protested Gene. "But it's not so. We had too much money and too many cattle. For ten years we ran behind, a little more every year. Then came the crash—"

Gene hesitated, spreading wide his hands, looking from wife to daughter. Nels was not the only one who would find it difficult to lie to Madge Stewart.

"I get it," she said soberly, dropping those penetrating eyes. "I've always understood Majesty's Rancho was mine. You know, just in a vain and playful way, perhaps. How about that, Dad—seriously?"

"Of course this ranch is yours—or will be someday, which is just the same. And a little elephant, my daughter."

"Not for little Madge. What do you suppose I went to college for? What did I study economics for? Dad—Mom, I tell you I'm home for good. I'm crazy about my home. It has been swell to have unlimited money. Let me play around this summer—entertain my friends—then I'll hop to the job."

Chapter Four

Bonita's Boy Friend

IN THE afternoon Gene rode out on the range toward Bolton with one of his half-Mexican riders, Manuel Mains, son of Danny, the only one of Danny's four youngsters that Gene thought was worth much. Bonita, the eldest, was distractingly pretty, to be sure, but that seemed to be a bad thing for the girl.

Gene wanted to find out how many telephone poles were down on the short cut of the line across the valley and over the ridge. From that point on in to Bolton, both the survey of the line and the necessary repair work could be done by truck. Manuel and he met some hours later, and the sum of their report was an agreeable surprise to Gene. Less than a dozen poles were down and there was only one

break in the wire. Several days' labor, after the new poles had been snaked down from the foothills, would put the telephone in working order again, which Gene saw was important in view of Madge's return and the activity presaged for the summer.

Then it would be very necessary to go over the road and make that safe for automobilists. The problem of help occupied his mind. That, added to his other difficulties seemed an insurmountable fact, yet somehow, Madge's presence counteracted it, and made that afternoon sojourn in the colorful and fragrant sage as pleasant as it was serious. Riding back, he thought that he could not succumb to gloom and hopelessness.

Manuel turned off at the village to get his supper. Bonita, whose sharp eyes always saw everybody and everything, waved a red scarf at Gene, as if he had been a cowboy with whom to flirt. Gene waved back at her. Despite her deviltry, she was lovable.

It was almost sunset when Gene turned his horse over to Jose. He saw Madge's golden head blazing from the top of the pasture fence. Nels's white locks appeared brighter by contrast. They were watching Madge's horses, which no doubt had been turned loose. Gene, about to join them, was deflected by the sight of a strange rider coming down the lane. Instead Gene proceeded to the square where one of the *vaqueros* and some Mexican boys surrounded a black horse in front of the blacksmith shop. Gene ascertained that the horse was lame. He examined the leg, which proved not to be badly sprained, and upon rising he saw that the strange rider had arrived.

Gene's first glance at the handsome young man in his flashy cowboy attire occasioned him some amusement. A forerunner of the range contingent that inevitably would throng there to see Madge!

The rider got down, and introduced himself, saying bluntly that he wanted a job. Gene looked him over, favorably impressed. He seemed under 25, tall and lithe, powerful of limb and shoulder, and he had a strong open countenance and fine hazel eyes, medium dark and very penetrating. His black horse would have been an asset for any cowboy.

Gene read a letter of recommendation from Ren Starr, and it was not many moments till he liked Lance Sidway's looks, his words, and had given him a job on the ranch.

Meanwhile one of the lads had taken the black horse down the lane for a drink. Gene anticipated results from that procedure and he was tinglingly prepared for Madge's ecstatic squeal. That girl had cowboy blood in her. Then Gene, with malice aforethought, sent the unwilling Sidway in Madge's direction. They met, so precipitously that Madge ran into Sidway and almost fell out of his arms. Astounded, plainly stunned for an instant, Madge's vivid face suddenly flashed radiance. Recognition and rapture were evident in her speaking eyes.

"*You!* Oh, if it isn't my hero!" she cried in intense excitement. "Of all the surprises I *ever* had! You darling!" And with swift action that matched her voice, she lifted her gauntleted hands to Sidway's shoulders and rose on her tiptoes to kiss him warmly.

Gene, utterly astonished as he was at his daughter's impetuous action, yet did not fail to catch the reaction in the boy. When she ran into his arms he gave a violent start and ut-

tered a gasp. Then at her words of surprise and delight, followed by that impulsive kiss, his face turned a dusky scarlet. It receded as she drew back until he was pale.

"My God! You? Not *you!*"

"Yes—me!" she replied sweetly.

"You can't be—be Stewart's daughter?" he implored. "You can't be Madge—not Majesty Stewart!"

"I am. And you know that, you clever devil," she returned in positive admiration. "You put one over, didn't you—meeting me *here?* No crowded noisy parking-place for you, Mr. Oregon! You wanted to keep that date here, at my home, on the Arizona range. Romantic—individual—beautiful! I figured you perfectly, I knew you weren't ordinary. Dad, isn't it just darling?" said Madge. "This is my hero—the young man whom I told you and Mom about—who rescued me at the campus riot. Lance Sidway—my father, Gene Stewart."

"Madge, we haven't been introduced, but we've met," replied Gene genially, and he eyed Lance as if he had been taken in a bit.

"Of course. How silly of me! He just rode in and you—"

"I gave him a job," interposed Gene.

"What? To ride for you!—He is a fast worker. Lance Sidway, I don't know just what to make of you."

"That goes for me, too," replied Gene with a smile which softened the doubt.

"Mr. Stewart, I am on the spot," burst out Sidway. "I told you I'd never met your daughter—never heard of her till I met Starr. How could I guess she was that one? I did meet her—as she told you. I'm innocent of—"

"Sidway, don't take it so hard," went on Gene kindly. "I was young once. It didn't turn out just as you planned. But I'd have liked you better if you'd told me—"

"I did not lie to you," declared the cowboy with such vehemence that Gene began to feel sorry for him. Then Madge claimed Sidway's attention.

"I get you, Mr. Lance Sidway. But I've been kidded by experts," she said, with laughing eyes. She was pleased with his subterfuge.

"Yeah? You get what?" he demanded bluntly, and it appeared that his awkwardness was vanishing.

"What is so obvious."

"Miss Stewart, it may look obvious that I knew who you were—that I deliberately rode out here because of you. But it is not true."

At that moment Nels and the lad leading Sidway's horse came around the corner.

"Nels, shake hands with Lance Sidway," interposed Gene, glad to relieve the growing strain between the young couple. "He hails from Oregon. And I've just given him a job."

"Howdy," drawled Nels and shook hands with the flustered lad. Gene was of the opinion that Sidway had no conception of how he was being looked over by the keenest eyes in Arizona.

When Madge saw the black horse again, her swift reversal of mood eased the situation. Like a true range rider she walked around the black, all eyes, placing a careful yet confident hand on him, and never saying a word until she had made a second circuit.

"Nels!" she importuned, as if wanting him to refute her judgment.

"Wal, I'm shore sorry, lass," drawled Nels. "He's a grand hawss. He's got Cedar beat all holler."

"Traitor!" she flashed, her eyes blazing purple fire at Nels. "You're teasing me. Nels darling, you don't mean

that?"

"Wal, mebbe I'm exaggeratin' some. But see heah, Majesty. Even if you been away from the range so long, you know a great hawss when you see him."

"I'm afraid I do– Mr. Sidway, will you *please* let me get on him?" Her query to the cowboy was tinged with slight sarcasm, yet her desire was deeply sincere.

"Of course–if you wish. The stirrups will be long."

Madge swung gracefully up into the saddle and Nels beat the cowboy to her side. Presently the stirrups were laced up to fit Madge and she walked Umpqua across the green square, trotted him up the lane a few hundred yards, paced him a little and loped him back. What a picture the black horse and the golden-haired girl made! Turning away from the sight himself, Gene saw it in Nels's worshipful eyes, and then he caught a gleam of the eternal cowboy in Sidway's.

Madge sat the saddle as if reluctant to get off, while she patted the arched glossy neck. She was flushed of face. Her eyes were soft, glowing. At that moment Gene experienced the old fullness of love for her in his heart. She was Madeline's daughter, but she was western. Presently she sat up in the saddle, the glamorous spell vanished, and she faced the three men coolly. Gene imagined he could read her mind.

"His trot does not equal Cedar's, but his pace and lope beat that of any horse I ever rode." She slipped slowly out of the saddle, facing Sidway. "No need to ask how you love Umpqua," she said, with a softness rounding the turn of her words. "You won't take it amiss if I–almost insult you?"

Sidway stared at her, and then with something of a gallant gesture he repudiated any possibility of her doing that.

"What value do you place on Umpqua?" she launched, suddenly keen, vibrant.

"Value! None, Miss Stewart."

"Every horse has a value. Tell me."

"Diamonds, rubies, gold!"

"Swell! I like you the better for that. Do you know that you could sell him for five thousand dollars?"

"Humph. A movie star offered me that," returned the cowboy contemptuously.

"I'll give you six thousand for Umpqua."

"No."

"Eight thousand."

"No!"

"*Ten thousand!*"

Sidway's flushed face turned pale, either with anger or some other emotion.

"Miss Stewart, don't you know that money can't buy everything?" he queried with dignity. "Umpqua is all I own in the world. He has saved my life twice. I love him. We raised him from a colt, and all of us loved him."

"I know I'm rotten," she cried, as if forced. "But no matter. I love him, too."

"That's well. I'm glad you do. But –you can't buy him."

"But be reasonable." Madge stamped her booted foot until her spur jingled sharply. Tears of vexation and disappointment burned out of her big eyes and they glowed and dilated like mystic balls. "You admit you're broke. I offer you a small fortune. You can get a start here on the range. Dad and Nels will help you. I will. You can still go on loving Umpqua. You may ride him –sometimes. You can make me happy.

Please, Mr. Lance Sidway."

"I told you—no."

"Mr. Sidway, I can't have you riding around here on a finer horse than—a horse that I want."

"That'll be just too bad," returned the cowboy in a tone which brought a hue to her cheeks that matched the carmine on her lips.

"You appear to be rather dense. Do I have to tell you I will not have you on this ranch?"

"You don't have to tell me anything, lady. Your father hired me and he'll have to fire me."

She looked at Gene with great luminous eyes. "Dad!"

"Madge, you're unreasonable," replied Gene coolly, smiling upon her. "I need riders badly. Sidway has offered to ride for me at a wage I am ashamed to take advantage of. I couldn't discharge him just because he refuses to sell you his horse. Could I, Nels?"

Nels showed plainly that he was between the devil and the deep sea. Madge had been his especial joy and treasure all her life, as Gene well knew, and he had always spoiled her. Gene enjoyed his old cowman's extreme discomfiture, but knew he would extract himself somehow.

"Majesty, I shore know how you feel aboot this hawss," he began in his slow drawl. "But, lass, you're bound to respect Sidway for his feelin's. I reckon you wouldn't be playin' the game if you fired him. Shore I never heahed of you bein' unfair. You used to give hawsses to cowboys. An' I reckon, if yore happiness actooly depends on ownin' Umpqua, wal, in the nature of things on the range, you know, he'll jest naturally drift yore way."

"Very well, Mr. Sidway, you stay," said Madge loftily. "I'm sorry if I was unfair. But I will have that horse."

"Thank you, Miss Stewart. But I do not want to remain under false pretenses. You will not have Umpqua."

"I accept your challenge. If you don't show yellow and ride off—we'll see." Then she smiled upon him without malice or resentment, and wheeled to start up the path.

"Hey, Madge, you're forgetting your car," called Gene. "What'll we do with it?"

She turned to call back in a sweet high-pitched voice, "Mr. Lance Sidway can use it to bed down his darling Umpqua." Then she was gone into the foliage.

"Whoopee," sighed Gene, and Nels came back with "Doggone, old pard! Seems like old times when you fust came to Majesty's Rancho, before thet lass was borned."

Sidway had been lengthening his stirrups with swift hands. Presently he turned with pale face and hazel eyes shadowed.

"I'll be on my way. Thank you, Gene Stewart," he said.

"Hold on, Sidway. You wouldn't let my daughter's taunt—"

"No, it's not that, altogether. I know you didn't believe me—that I didn't come here on—on Miss Stewart's account. And under the circumstances I don't want to stay."

"No, I didn't believe you," rejoined Gene seriously, searching the troubled face.

"See heah, cowboy," interposed Nels, descending from the porch with clinking slow steps. "Don't ride off hot-haided. Air you on the level? You didn't know this was Majesty's Rancho an' thet the lass you done a favor for in Los Angeles was Madge?"

"Nels, I did not," replied Sidway forcibly.

After a keen scrutiny of Sidway's face, the old cowman turned to Gene. "Boss, he's tellin' the truth. Don't let him go."

"Hanged if I don't believe it myself."

"Stewart, I swear that I am on the level. I didn't know. It was just an infernal coincidence," rejoined Sidway huskily.

"Okay then. Let's shake on it. Maybe your infernal coincidence will turn out well for me and this ranch problem. I've a hunch it will."

Next morning Gene was out early enough to catch Nels and Sidway at a sunrise breakfast.

"Wal, look who's heah," drawled the old cowman. "Mawnin', Gene. You ain't got oot this early fer years."

"Neither have you, old-timer," returned Gene jocularly. "Shall we put it down to our lately acquired cowboy, Mr. Sidway?"

"You shore can. The son-of-a-gun kept me up till eleven o'clock tellin' stories, an' then, by thunder, he rustled me oot before sunup."

Manifestly Nels and the newcomer had gotten along famously. Sidway appeared fresh and eager, and having donned his old outfit, he looked a lithe and striking rider.

"Don't call me Mr. Stewart," Gene replied to his greeting. "I'm Gene, or Boss, or Stewart."

"Okay, Boss. I sure appreciate falling in with you. And I'm asking if I may have the day on my own."

"On your own? What do you mean?" inquired Gene, puzzled.

"If you give me the day, I'm pretty sure I can tell you where your cattle have been rustled lately."

"Gene, he made some such crack as thet to me," drawled Nels. "Jest young hot blood. But I don't know."

"Sidway, are you hinting that you can find out what Nels and I and Danny Mains couldn't?"

"No, I'm not hinting. I'm telling you," replied the cowboy with an engaging smile.

"You don't lack nerve," returned Gene shortly.

"Boss, I don't mean to be fresh. I just think you men have been hunting for rustlers in an old-fashioned way."

"Old-fashioned?" echoed Gene, while Nels *ha-ha'd* vociferously.

"Listen, young man, rustling is rustling. Cattle don't fly. They have to be driven. On their hoofs. And hoofs leave tracks."

"Only so far. I'll bet you tracked yours as far as a macadamized road, and no farther."

"Yes, that's true. Or I should say, Jose and Manuel tracked them."

"Then what?"

"Wal," interposed Nels, "them two riders split an' rode east and west fer twenty-odd miles, an' never found the place where them hoof tracks left thet highway."

"Swell!" ejaculated Sidway, clapping his hands. "That's exactly what I wanted to be sure of. Saves me the trouble."

"Of what?"

"Bothering with tracks *on* the highway. They never left the highway short of Douglas or Tucson."

"Listen, son," returned Nels, his drawl more pronounced than ever, and very patient. "Shore you're talkin' to a couple of old cowmen, oot of date, an' I reckon pretty dumb, as you youngsters say. Will you talk a language we know? These heah modern days air hell on speed, shore, but cattle cain't

be drove on a cement road fer hundreds of miles."

"Sure they can. It's a cinch. Your cattle *were* so driven."

"Doggone!" complained Nels, turning to Gene. "An' I was kinda takin' to this lad."

"Nels, he's got something on us," declared Gene. "See here, Lance, just how were my cattle driven along the highway?"

"Simple as a, b, c—in trucks."

"*Trucks!*" burst out Gene incredulously.

"Wal, what air we comin' to?" ejaculated Nels, scratching his white head. "Gene, shore we can look forward to be robbed by airplanes next."

Quickly Lance told them about the truck he had driven from Douglas, and then Gene told him to saddle up Range, one of Madge's horses, and spend the day verifying the tracks of the stolen cattle.

During the afternoon Gene persuaded Madge to drive him up the old road toward the foothills, where was located the big spring that fed the lake and provided irrigation for the ranch. As the road was rough they did not get back until toward the end of the afternoon.

Passing through the little Mexican village, the inhabitants of which had once depended solely upon the ranch, Gene said to Madge, "Thanks, daughter. You're almost as good a driver as you are a horseman. I'll stop off at Danny Mains's and walk home from there."

"Oh—oh!" said Madge presently. "Look who's here."

Then Gene espied Sidway, on foot, leaning on the gate talking to Bonita Mains. Range, bridle down, stood near by. There was no more denying the cowboy's demeanor than Bonita's delight. The dusky-eyed maiden radiated charm and coquetry. That Sidway was not in the least embarrassed by their arrival somehow gave Gene a tingle of expectancy and satisfaction. The car stopped. Gene stepped out.

"I'll wait, Dad," said Madge lightly. "No need to walk home when you can ride. Bonita!—*Buenas tardes.* How are you?"

"*Buenas tardes,* Miss Stewart," returned Bonita, shy and flushed. "I am so happy to see you. Welcome home to Majesty's Rancho!"

"Thanks, Bonita. I'm glad to see you. Introduce me to your boy friend— Oh, it's Mr. Sidway. I thought I knew that horse. How'd you like him?"

"Not so much. He's cranky, contrary. Spoiled by girls, I expect," replied Sidway coolly.

"That's fine. I'd rather you didn't ride him."

Gene spoke up: "Bonita, please call your father." And as the girl flashed toward the house, Gene turned with interest to Madge and the cowboy. She was quietly lighting a cigarette. But Gene had never seen her eyes as magnificent as now. Sidway, however, had stepped away from the gate to bend eagle eyes down upon the sage.

"Boss, look at that car," he said quickly. "Hitting only the high spots!"

Gene espied a speeding black car appearing to run away from a long trail of dust.

"He's sure coming," agreed Gene, puzzled. Drivers did not race on that rough road for nothing.

"Hope it's my mail," spoke up Madge. "I left orders for it to be sent out."

At that juncture Danny Mains came out, his homely weatherbeaten face

wrinkled in a huge smile. Gene called his attention to the car. Mains took one look and then said: "Darn fool'll break his neck, ridin' like thet."

Then he greeted Madge and the cowboy. Bonita, bright-eyed and self-conscious, came out to join her father and gaze down the slope.

"Ren Starr!" she cried.

Gene was quick to detect a note of fear stronger than the surprise in her exclamation. Sidway must have caught it too, for he turned a narrowed gaze upon the girl. Then the group watched the racing car until it passed out of sight under the slope. Bonita, with troubled face, left them to enter the house. Gene, attending to Danny's speculation about Starr, still had an ear for a byplay between Sidway and Madge.

"Awful pretty girl—this Bonita," the cowboy was saying.

"Swell kid. On the make, too. But am I telling you?" retorted Madge.

"You appear to be. I didn't get that about her."

"And you such a fast worker—Well!"

"I—I like your horse," went on Lance, evidently no match for her at repartee.

Her voice had a cutting edge. "But you said Range was cranky."

"Sure. Can't a fellow like cranky horses—and girls, too, for that matter?"

"I don't know anything about such fellows."

"Yeah? I'll bet what you don't know wouldn't fill a book. When is your college crowd coming?"

"That can hardly concern you, Mr. Sidway. But they arrive on the twentieth."

"Thank you. I wanted to know because I'd like to help your father a little. Then I'll beat it."

"Oh! I get you. Dad thought you had taken to him and the ranch."

"I had. You see, I just left Hollywood. I was fed up on a lot of glamour gals and pretty boys. And I'm leery of a college outfit."

"Indeed. Mine would not embarrass you, Mr. Sidway. Certainly my girl friends do not aspire to collect cowboys."

"Yeah! Too slow, I suppose. Prefer gangsters, eh?"

"*What?* You insulting—"

"You can't kid me, Miss Majesty Stewart. Listen, let me tell you something while I've a chance. Your dad is swell. A grand guy. And if you were a credit to him you'd not have this crowd of yours out here now."

"Oh! And—why?" gasped Madge, as if stifled.

"Because he's in trouble—deep—without your fast crowd to make it worse."

At that moment the humming car sped over the brow of the slope to draw swiftly up to the waiting group. The driver was Ren Starr. As he stopped, Gene espied the tip of a rifle barrel sticking above the door, and in the back seat a pile of duffel, topped with a saddle and bedroll.

"Howdy, folks," he said laconically. "Heah we all air."

"Wal, Ren, you look like bizness," returned Danny Mains soberly.

"Glad to see you, Starr," added Gene.

"Boss, you got another new cowboy. Right heah an' now. Ah, Miss Majesty, I shore am glad to see you back home. Hope it's fer good. An' heah's my new pard, Lance Sidway."

"Darn glad to see you, Starr," rejoined Sidway, eager and puzzled.

"Gather around, Gene an' Danny. You'll get an earful," announced the

newcomer, and as the three leaned over his car he whispered, directly to Sidway, "Pard, yore trucks rolled in no more'n a couple of hours ago. Stopped at the big garage acrost the street. I got most damn curious. An' when the six drivers mosied into the lunchroom I went round aboot to peep into the trucks. *Empty!* Graves, the new hired hand at the garage, was pilin' up, gas, oil, water, air. And he give it away thet the trucks was stayin' over, mebbe all night. Like hell they will! Pard, these air yore canvas-covered cattle-rustlin' trucks. Them drivers air timed fer tonight. Gene, they're gonna make one of them raids on yore cattle. An' I'll tell the world they're gonna get a helluva jar."

Gene swore under his breath, and feeling a handclasp on his arm, he turned to see Madge, pale, with dilating eyes of purple fire, close behind him.

"Wal, you gasoline hound!" declared Danny Mains. "Back on the job."

"Starr, you've more hunch than that. Spill it," said Sidway.

"Shore. I seen a rider—stranger—who'd been hangin' aboot all day—go into thet lunchroom. He was the go-between. An' then I beat it fer heah."

Chapter Five

A Buzzing Bee

MAJESTY STEWART had told her parents all she thought they should know about her life at school. She had not glossed over the fact that it had been a fast life, but she had not mentioned her affair with Honeybee Uhl. It had been brought home to her on her trip to the ranch that she actually stood in danger from the steely-eyed gangster.

It had happened in Yuma, where she was spending the night at the Alcatraz. She had gone out after dinner for a short walk, and as she returned to the hotel a long black car drew up to the curb. Madge, as she passed it, heard a low exclamation, then quick footsteps.

"Gold-top, what you doing here?" called a sharp voice, cold as ice. Madge knew to whom it belonged before she turned to see Uhl, bareheaded under the electric light, his eyes glittering from his pale face.

"Oh!—hello—this is a surprise," replied Madge haltingly, as her wits leaped to meet the situation.

"You alone?"

"Yes. On my way home," she said slowly, fighting a confusion of thought.

"Home! Say, what kind of a twist are you? Told me you lived in Santa Barbara."

"Did I? Will you be good enough to let go my arm? You hurt."

"Come for a ride," he returned, in a voice that brooked no opposition to his will and he almost dragged her toward the big black car.

"No, thanks," rejoined Madge as, supple and strong, with one wrench she freed herself. "I'm tired. Drove all day. See you tomorrow."

"Like hell you will! Same as phone calls. I'm seeing you right now. Get that, baby!" He was neither angry nor insolent. His face had the clear cold chiseling of a diamond.

Madge was not afraid of him, but she realized that she should be. She wavered between turning her back upon him and asking him into the hotel. The important thing was to get in off the street, and acting upon that she said, "I won't talk here. Come in

for a moment."

Uhl hung close to her, hand at her elbow, and did not speak while they went through the lobby. He steered Madge into a back room with subdued lights, where several couples sat at tables, drinking. Here Uhl led her to a seat at a corner table and ordered cocktails from the attendant.

"What kind of a deal are you giving me, sister?" he began forcefully, as he leaned toward her across the table. All about him was cold, suspicious, repellent.

"Deal?" she queried, playing for time.

"You knew I fell for you. I told you. And you met me, danced and drank with me. Then when I get stuck deep you try to pull this 'I'll be seeing you' gag. That doesn't go. See?"

"Mr. Uhl, I seem to see that you have misunderstood me."

"Yeah? Nothing doing, eh?"

"If you wish to put it that way."

"Baby, I've gone nuts over some dames," began Uhl deliberately, apparently having suppressed his violent feelings. "But none ever held a candle to you. I'm horribly in love with you, sweetheart."

"Oh, I'm sorry you've allowed it to go so far," murmured Madge. "Any girl would be flattered and— But, you see, I'm engaged."

"Yeah? What's that to me?"

"I can't imagine, I'm sure. But I know a girl can't accept serious attentions from one man when she's engaged to another."

"The hell dames can't. They do. They all do— Aw, Beauty, don't be such a plaster. I'm crazy about you. If you're alone here tonight let me—"

Madge felt his slim hand slide upon her knee under the table. His eyes had a hypnotic power. For a moment she felt paralyzed. Then her rigidity broke to a start, to a stinging heat, to an insupportable sensation. That tearing thing seemed to actuate Madge more than Uhl's outrage. In a fury, she kicked out with all her might. Her onslaught sent the man sprawling over his chair. Madge almost overturned the table as she leaped up. Wheeling, she fled from the room and never stopped until she backed up against her locked door.

"Serves you damn—right!" she panted passionately. "Playing with a heel like him! Are you ever—going to think?"

Madge hardly had time to think then. Hurried steps in the hall preceded a knock on the door. Another knock, louder, followed, and the handle of the door was tried.

"Madge!"

"Who is it?" she called.

"Bee. Let me in. I want to square myself."

"I'll take your word for it—from that side."

"I was out of my head. I'll come clean. You're not like other dames."

"Thanks, Mr. Uhl. You discovered that rather late. But I take the blame for your mistake."

"Will you let me in?"

"No. I'm going to bed."

"That wouldn't make any difference to me. I want to talk to you."

"Well, I don't want to listen. But I'll see you in the morning. At breakfast. Eight o'clock," she replied, thinking that might be a way to get rid of him.

"Okay, baby. But don't string me again."

Uhl's voice had an ominous ring that jarred unpleasantly upon Madge's ruffled nerves. Uhl was dangerous. Recall

ing his bragging, the roll of bills he exhibited, his extraordinary intimation of some kind of power, which Madge now analyzed as underworld, she realized that she might be in actual peril and by no means should she encounter him again. She determined to be a hundred miles and more beyond Yuma by eight o'clock next morning. Following that decision her first impulse was to telephone the desk to leave a call for five o'clock, but she thought better of it. She always awakened early, provided she went to bed early. This she did at once, and eventually fell asleep.

The roaring of a motor truck awakened Madge. She hardly seemed to have done more than close her eyes. Ruddy light on the desert ridges attested to sunrise. Her wrist watch said ten minutes to five. By five o'clock she was at the desk downstairs, paying her bill. She told the night clerk, in case anyone asked, that she had received a telegram which recalled her to Los Angeles. In another ten minutes she was speeding east on the Arizona highway.

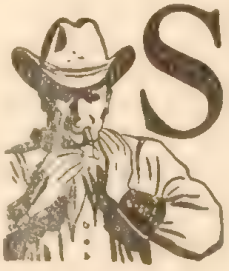
So it was that now, hearing Ren Starr's report, she felt a chill of premonition stealing over her. She shook it off when she saw how eagerly her father and the others received the news and organized a plan to forestall the rustlers.

Lance Sidway obtruded into her thoughts as she tossed on her bed that night. Certainly that handsome young cowboy had injected some vim and vigor into the dead old ranch. She saw him; his fine eyes, shadowed, troubled, and then blazing with scorn, haunted her as did that taunt about gangsters. She hated him, but she deserved it. Her conscience wrung that from her. Indeed, he had kept the rendezvous that day, and bad luck have it! he had seen Uhl meet her, get into her car. And being Hollywood-wise he had caught the cut of that gentleman all in a few minutes. Not this fact, but his scorn was what galled Madge.

Still, if he had been so burned up by her friendship with an underworld character, why had he learned her name, where she lived, and conceived the brilliant idea of meeting her at her own home? Madge did not believe his denial of this. The answer was that no matter whom she knew, what she had done, he must have conceived more than a mere interest in her. But was that the answer? Madge conceived the idea that there was a remote possibility it was not.

Chapter Six

Rustlers on Wheels



STANDING back in the shadow of Nels's cabin, Lance felt a little abashed at his agitation, as he compared it to the coolness of these Arizonians. He did not want them to see that he was an unfledged cowboy, so far as rustlers were concerned.

"Wal, I reckon you fellers better have a smack of grub an' a cup of coffee with me," Nels drawled, as Starr ended his brief story.

"Reckon I hed, at thet," rejoined Mains. "My two Bonitas would be too interested in thet confab we hed by the house."

"We'll all sponge on you, Nels," said Stewart. "Pitch in, fellows."

"All set 'cept fryin' some more ham. You cut it, Danny— Whar's Sidway? Come heah, cowboy. Gene, this truck

rustlin' is shore two-bit stuff. Kinda oot of our experience. Let's get the cowboy's angle on it."

"Suits me."

"Sidway, you oughta be up on this automobile cattle stealin'. What'll we do?"

"We'll intercept this raid, of course," replied Lance, realizing that he was on the spot and forcing a calm and serious front when inwardly he was quaking. It reassured him that his wide sombrero hid his face.

"Hev a slice of ham. I can cook, cowboy— Wal, how'd you intercept it?"

"I'd like Starr in on this with me," replied Sidway.

"By all means. You young bloods put your heads together," said Stewart.

"I'm with you, pard, an' I've got some ideas," returned Starr nonchalantly. "But I cain't talk an' eat."

"Starr, what hour of the night will that highway be most free of traffic?" asked Lance.

"About three in the mawnin' thar's a quiet spell. Sometimes fer two hours not a darn car goes by."

"That will be the time the thieves will load," concluded Lance.

"I agree. And even then it's pretty risky. Old-time rustlers wouldn't be that brazen," said Stewart.

"They must be ambushed, or at least surprised," went on Lance. "They'll be waiting or driving along slow at the place nearest the highway—most convenient to pick up the cattle."

"Thet's less than forty miles from where we're talkin'," said Starr. "I spotted the blackest bunch of cattle on my way oot. I can drive fairly close. We'd hev to walk the rest of the way."

"I was going to suggest that," resumed Lance. "But not to drive too close. These raiders, whose job it is to round up the cattle, could hear a car. They will be mounted—acquainted with the range—probably living on it."

"In cahoots with the truck drivers. Pard, you said a mouthful."

"Reckon he did thet same little thing," observed Mains in dry subtlety.

"Wal, Gene, the kids ain't so pore," said Nels. "If yore through eatin' an' talkin' let's go. When we git down thar on the flat we can figger the rest."

"What's the hurry, Nels?" asked Stewart.

"Wal, I ain't trustin' them hop-haids to wait till mawnin'. I reckon they'd jest as lief rob us in broad daylight."

Soon after that the five men, armed to the teeth, passed down the road in Starr's car, driving without lights. They had reached the village, passed the main street, when, approaching Mains's house, Sidway's keen eyes, accustomed to the dark, espied two mounted riders close to the fence.

"Hold it, Ren," he whispered. "There! Down the walk past Mains's house. Two horsemen! They're moving."

"My gosh, I see them," replied Starr. "Gone now. Listen— Heah them hoofs? Good fast trot."

"Boys," interposed Mains, "it ain't nothin' to see hawssmen around heah. They ride up bold as hell an' then again they sneak up like Injuns. Bonita's the reason."

Lance bit his tongue to keep from bursting out with the news that he had seen Bonita's dark form glide across in front of a yellow-lighted window. To

his mind neither the riders nor the girl had moved without significance of secrecy. Lance resolved to make up to this pretty *señorita* for two reasons.

"Drive on, Ren," said Stewart presently.

Below the village some few hundred yards Starr steered off the road down the slope. In the dark he had to go very slowly, a procedure difficult to accomplish on account of the grade. A vast dim emptiness stretched away under the stars. Far down, double pin points of light, moving along, attested to the presence of a car on the highway. Lance asked Stewart how long that road had encroached upon his range.

"Six or seven years, if I remember. Used to bother old-timers. But that feeling has gone into the discard with the cattle business."

"It'll pick up again and be better than ever," declared Lance.

"Ren, stop every little way, so we can listen."

It was a silent night, not yet cooled off from the day's heat. The rustle of sage and the low hum of insects accentuated the silence. Stars were growing brighter in the darkening blue. Gradually the men ceased talking. Once down on the flat Starr had easier driving. Presently he ran out of the sage into the wash where on the sand and gravel the going was smoother and almost noiseless. Starr must have halted a dozen times at Nels's order and the five had listened intently before Lance heard cattle bawling.

"Reckon we've come fur enough. What say, Gene?" queried Nels. "Let's pile oot."

"I think I know about where we are," said Gene, peering about in the gloom. "Still pretty far from the road, that is, where this wash goes under. But the road curves in to the west."

"Cattle all aboot," observed Nels. "An' they ain't skeered, thet's shore. Let's mosey on till we heah somethin'."

Guardedly and slow, with senses alert, the men zigzagged through the sage, working southwest. Grazing and resting cattle grew more numerous. After what Lance believed was several miles' travel Nels halted them near a rocky mound.

"Fur enough, till we heah or see somethin'. You cowboys climb up thar."

The eminence appeared to be rather long and higher toward the west. Lance signed to Ren that he would climb the far point. He did not, however, get to do it, for a *hist* from Starr called him back. Lance joined Nels and Stewart who stood under Starr.

". . . aboot a mile from the highway," Ren was saying, in guarded voice. "Three big double lights comin' from Bolton. Trucks. They're close together. Movin' slow."

"How fur away?" queried Nels.

"Cain't say. Mebbe three miles, mebbe six."

"Nels, down along here about even with where we are now there are several benches that run close to the road and break off in banks. It would be a simple matter for trucks to be backed up against these banks and loaded. In some places you wouldn't even need a platform. And my cattle are tame."

"Wal, we're some sucker cattlemen," drawled Nels, and sat down with his back to the bank. "Set down an' let's wait fer Starr to find oot somethin'. Sidway, you got sharp eyes. Go off a ways an' listen. It's a still night. Listen fer cattle thet air disturbed."

Lance did as he was bidden, conscious of growing excitement. These

ranchmen evidently gave him credit for more and wilder experience than he had had. He felt that he must rise to the occasion. Presently there would be some sharp and critical work for all of them and he nerved himself to cool hard purpose. From time to time he heard Starr's low voice.

It was some time, however, fraught with suspense, before Lance's range-trained ear caught the faint trample of hoofs and occasional bawl of cattle. Whereupon he ran back to report.

"Good!" declared Stewart. "How about you, Starr?"

"I reckon I heahed but wasn't shore. I am now. Not so all-fired far, either. Boss, jest wait, I'm watchin' them trucks."

Starr did not speak again, and the others listened intently. The faint sounds of moving cattle augmented. Presently the cowboy whispered sharply, "Boss, the trucks hev stopped—jest a little to the right of us— Lights go out! —No, by damn—the trucks air turnin' —backin' off the road this way, or I'm a born fool."

"Wal, look like it's all set," said Nels, getting up. Stewart followed his example.

"Them rays of light flash across the highway," went on Starr.

" 'Pear to be linin' up— Fust lights gone out!"

"Come down, Ren. We'll be moseyin' along. Danny, you come with us. Gene, you go with Sidway. Work straight down to the road an' foller along it. We'll aim to slip up behind the *hombres* who're doin' the rustlin'."

In another moment Lance was gliding cautiously along at Stewart's heels. They progressed 50 steps or more when Stewart halted to listen.

"But Nels didn't say what to do!" whispered Lance.

"It's a cinch we'll break up the raid. But our object is to capture at least one each of the riders and drivers."

Lance silenced his misgivings and conjectures, and transferring his rifle to his left hand, he drew his gun. Stewart, he had observed, packed two guns, and Lance thrilled at the way he wore them. So different from the movie bad men! They stole along slowly, avoiding the larger sagebrush, careful not to scare the cattle, listening at intervals.

The hum of a motorcar off to the east distracted Lance's attention from the now audible moving herd. Presently he saw the lights and he and the rancher watched them grow and pass not far below, and go on out of sight. That car was making fast time. No doubt it did not see the trucks. Soon Lance followed Stewart out of the sage upon the highway, black and glistening under the stars.

"We're farther this way than we thought," whispered Stewart. "That bunch of cattle are down to the road— Hear that? We've got to hand it to these truck rustlers for nerve. Right on the highway! Not leary of noise."

"To hell with the ranchers, eh?" replied Lance with a little husky laugh. He felt the heat throb in his pulsing veins.

"They wouldn't put a guard out, as the old rustlers used to— Let's hurry along."

Stewart strode so swiftly that Lance could not hear anything while they were moving. But presently they halted; the trample of hoofs and bawl of cattle became plainly audible. On the third halt Lance distinctly heard the thump of hoofs upon a board floor.

"—!" swore Stewart. "Loading al-

ready! Won't that make Nels snort? It should be getting hot over there. But Nels would move slow."

After another hundred steps or so Stewart led off the highway into the sage. Lance divined that the rancher wanted cover to drop behind in case the truckmen flashed their lights. Nevertheless it was not long before Stewart went down on all fours to crawl. This was tremendously exciting to Lance. The thump of solid hoofs on wood drowned all the other sounds except an occasional snort or bawl. The cattle were being moved with amazing celerity and little noise.

"Beats me," muttered Stewart, then crawled on. They had scarcely gotten even with a point opposite, where a high black bulk loomed up squarely above the horizon and marked the position of the trucks, when huge glaring lights gleamed out of the darkness. Lance flattened himself beside Stewart. A low fringe of sage on their right saved them from detection. But Lance's throat contracted.

A harsh low voice, a sudden bursting of an engine, into whirring roar, a grind of wheels left no doubt that a truck was starting. It moved quickly down to the road, and turned so that the lights swerved to the right, leaving the men in darkness. Then the truck stopped and the driver called.

Stewart jerked Lance to his feet, whispering, "We've got to move. Careful now. Keep your head."

His voice, his presence stirred Lance as nothing else had ever done. Stewart ran along the sage and up on the road to the truck. Lance, sharp-eyed and tense, kept at his heels. The engine was purring. Reaching the front of the car Stewart jerked open the door and commanded, "*Hands up!*"

Lance over Stewart's shoulder saw the big gun go prodding into the driver's side. "Agg-h!" he ejaculated, and lifted his hands off the wheel.

A quick grating footstep on the other side of the car caused Lance to crouch. A man came swiftly round the front.

"Beat it, Bill—we're held up!" rasped the driver.

But this man cursed and swept up his arm. Lance having him covered, had only to pull the trigger. His shot preceded the other's only by an instant. Lance saw his action violently break, his gun burst red. A crash of bursting glass, a thud of bullets preceded Stewart's staggering away from the truck to fall. The driver, with hoarse bellows of alarm, shoved his power on so quickly that the cattle in the truck banged against the gate. Then the truck roared down the road.

The horror that gripped Lance at Stewart's fall nearly overcame him for a moment. Then strident yells, the flashing of lights and roaring of engines added to his fighting fury. Nimbly he leaped beyond the broad flares. And as the second truck whizzed down upon the road he emptied his gun at the front of the first one. The splintering crash of glass, the lurching of the car, the loud yells told that his bullets did some execution.

Both trucks gained the road. As they roared on shots rang out from the bank. Then Lance, resorting to his rifle, aimed above the red rear light of the last truck, and sent ten shots after it. Lowering the hot rifle, he stood a moment, shaking, wet with cold sweat, realizing all shots had ceased. He caught a clatter of rapid hoofs, the crowding of cattle, then a ringing voice:

"Hey, over there," called Nels.

"What'n hell was yore hurry?"

"Nels! Come–quick! Stewart's–" yelled Lance hoarsely.

"Keep your shirt on, cowboy," intercepted the cool voice of Stewart. Then Lance saw his tall dark form against the lighter gloom.

"Oh–Ste–wart. I was afraid," gasped Lance.

"Hello. Where are you, fellers?" shouted Danny Mains, and then followed Starr's cheery voice: "Busted, by thunder!"

"Here," called Stewart. Presently the three loomed on the road.

"Gene, you let 'um git away," protested Nels, hopping mad.

"Trucks vamoosed in spite of us. How about the riders?"

"Wal, we was creepin' up behind, all set, when you opened up the ball."

"Did you identify any of them?"

"Hell, we didn't even see them. Slick an' fast ootfit, Gene. Makes me more curious."

"I ain't so damn curious as I was," growled Danny Mains enigmatically.

"Pard, you shore done a lot of shootin'," declared Starr, peering into Lance's face.

"Here's what happened," explained Stewart. "Sidway and I got here just as that loaded truck came off the sage. When it turned on the road, we jumped and ran. It stopped. I opened the door and stuck my right gun in the driver's ribs. He yelled in spite of that. Then his pardner came running. Bill, the driver called him. Bill sure saw me. For he came up with a gun. I threw my left on him but it struck the car door, low down. Sidway shot this fellow–broke his aim–or sure as God made little apples he'd have killed me. At that he hit me. His bullet knocked me flat."

"Gene! You shot? Whar? Not a body hit?" exclaimed Nels.

There was a moment's silence, during which the cold began to creep into Lance's marrow.

"Don't know where," returned Stewart calmly, as he felt of his body and shoulders. "I'm bleeding. Busted glass cut me. That *hombre* saw my body outside the door and believe me he threw his gun on it. But Sidway's shot knocked him off. Maybe the bullet didn't hit me at all. Maybe it did, because I'm bleeding all over my face and head."

"Aw, then it cain't be serious," declared Nels with relief. "An' Sidway hit this *hombre?*"

"Bored him plumb center," replied Stewart grimly. "He stood just inside the light. I saw him drop like a sack. He's lying here somewhere."

Starr produced a flashlight and with the two men began searching the immediate space, while Lance fought the strangest, most sickening sensation of his life.

"Heah! Daid, I'll tell the world!" rang out Starr. "Lousy-lookin' little bastard! One of them hop-haids."

"Search him, Ren, and drag him off the road– Sidway, you're too damn good a shot. Dead men tell no tales."

"Wal, if you ask me, our new cowboy is a man after my kind. Gene, don't call him fer shootin' fast an' straight."

"I was kidding. But at that I wish Sidway had only crippled him– What'd he have on him, Ren?"

"Automatic tight in his mitt– Watch. Knife. Cigarettes. An' this wad of long green. Fellers, will you look at thet! A hundred-dollar bill on the ootside!"

Lance gradually dragged himself closer to the trio, and discerned Starr on his knees beside the dead man, a slack, spare figure, terribly suggestive,

showing in the flashlight a crooked visage, ghastly in hue and contortion.

"Wal, you lousy hop-haid," broke out Starr in genial levity, "bumped up agin the wrong hombre, didn't you? Lay hold, Danny, an' help me haul him over heah."

The cold gripe on Lance's internals slowly lessened, and he helped it pass by a desperate effort to conceal what he felt to be his squeamishness before these ranchers. He thought he could get by in the dark.

"Sidway must have stung more than this hombre," Stewart was saying to Nels. "He shot the front glasses out of both cars. And he sure cut loose with his rifle as they drove away. I heard the bullets hit that last truck."

"Wal, thanks to him, it didn't turn oot so pore. Mebbe thet money will more than pay fer the cattle they rustled."

"Boss, reckon I'll hev to drive back to Bolton in the mawnin' an' report this execution to the sheriff," said Starr, joining them.

"Yes. And I might have to see a doctor."

"Lemme look." Starr flashed his light upon the side of Stewart's face which he turned for inspection.

Lance saw with concern that the rancher was bloody enough to have been struck by a load of shot. The cowboy wiped the blood off, and peering closer, he ran his fingers over Stewart's cheek and temple and neck.

"Hell! You ain't been shot atall, Boss. Jest a blast of glass, I reckon. Leastways I cain't find any bullet hole. Gosh, I'm glad them glass bits missed yore eye."

"Feel here—back of my ear."

"Ah-ha!—Shore, he creased you thar. Hot as fire, huh? Thet was made by a bullet, Boss."

"A miss is as good as a mile. Sidway, I owe you something."

"How aboot moseyin' along? Thet's a long tramp fer a man who never trailed rustlers on foot," said Nels plaintively.

When Lance entered Nels's bunkhouse to have breakfast he sensed such a great transformation in himself that he felt certain his friends would exclaim about it. But they did not notice any difference in him. During the meal they did not once mention the affair of last night. All in the day for them, thought Lance! He essayed a cool and quiet demeanor which he meant to make permanent.

"Nels, what'll I do today?" he asked.

"Doggone if I know, son," drawled the other, scratching his gray head. "They're all goin' to town. Go wrangle yore hawss an' I'll ask Gene when he comes down."

Umpqua had made the most of the huge grassy pasture. Lance found him in the extreme far corner, more than a mile from the corrals, and rode him bareback to the corrals. After rubbing him down and saddling and bridling him, Lance led him up the lane to the court.

Stewart, his head swathed in white bandages, stood by Madge's car talking to Starr. As Lance passed the open door of the store he heard Madge's rich voice, breaking with a singular note, and it gave him a wild impulse to run. Starr hailed him, and then he and Stewart approached.

"Hope you're okay, Boss," said Lance eagerly.

"Mornin', Sidway. Reckon I feel like a chicken thief who had to have the buckshot picked out of him. Would

you like to go to town with us?"

"Not on my own account, sir. Thanks. There's a lot I can find to do here." Lance said this at the same moment he heard Nels's clinking slow step behind him and a lighter pace that stopped his heart. But he did not turn.

"Starr will come back soon," went on the rancher. "It might be a good idea for you and him to fix up your quarters. Nels said they had gone to rack."

"How about the cattle?" asked Lance.

"They have been left free to run the range, and as you saw, have worked low down. Danny and I will be driving a big herd to the railroad soon. Maybe next week. I'll make that deal in town today. As for immediate jobs, I want you and Ren to repair the water flume and the telephone line pronto."

"Yes, sir. I'll get started on them today."

"Nels, did you make out your list of supplies?"

"Majesty writ it oot fer me."

"Say, what have you been tellin' that girl?" demanded Stewart.

"Me? Why, Gene, nothin' atall," drawled Nels innocently.

"You old liar! Look at her!"

Lance wished to do this with an almost irresistible desire. But he sat down on the edge of the porch, dragging Starr with him, aware that the others had stepped into the store.

"Ren, you'll not forget my baggage?"

"Shore, pard. Anythin' else? Say, how's yore bunkhouse fixed up? I didn't look."

"It's not fixed up at all," replied Lance. "No mattress, no chair, no mirror, nothing to wash in or with. No towels. I've been using Nels's."

"Wal, mine cain't be no wuss—"

"Ren, buy what you need today," said Madge Stewart, from behind them. "Whatever is this ranch coming to?"

"Aw, you heah, Miss Majesty. Good mawnin'," replied Starr with confusion, as he stood up to turn toward her. "About the ranch—wal, I'd say things was lookin' up."

"Lance Sidway!"

Arising stiffly, Lance wheeled to doff his sombrero and greet her in apparent composure. But the tone of her voice and then the look of her played havoc with all his resolves. At this juncture Stewart and Nels came out of the store.

"Nels, do you think I dare ride in with Madge?" quizzed Stewart.

"Wal, I'd jump at the chance."

"You old traitor! Why, you never could be hired to ride in a car. Do you remember Link Stevens driving that big white car of Madeline's?"

"My Gawd, do I? But I'll bet Majesty would hev druv rings around Link."

Madge was looking down upon Lance. The fairness of her face appeared enhanced by the scarlet upon her lips. In truth, Lance saw that she was pale and that her eyes were unnaturally large, glowing, dilating, with a violent fire. Then she seemed to float down the steps and entwine her arm in Lance's, and lift her lovely face to him, that in the action flushed a hue to match her lips and then went pearly-white.

"You saved Dad's life!"

Lance had prepared himself for he knew not what, though not for this close proximity, the tight pressure of her arm, the quivering feel of her. "Oh, no, Miss Stewart. Somebody has exaggerated."

"Nels told me," said Madge intensely.

"I might have known," went on Lance, trying to be cool and nonchalant. "Nels is swell, but you know he—Starr told me what an old liar he is."

"Heah!" yelped Starr. "Don't you get me in bad. I never said thet—"

"Miss Stewart, please—" interposed Lance. "You mustn't give me undue credit. I was there—and I'm glad—I made myself useful. I didn't want to kill the man—"

"*You killed him?*" she cried, aghast. "Oh, Nels didn't tell me that."

Lance spread wide his hands to the watching men, as if to say, "Now see what you've done." But it was not the revelation that distracted him.

"So you're bound to be our good angel!" she exclaimed softly, and shook him gently.

"Really I—you—it was—it's not so much."

"Nothing! And you killed a robber who'd have murdered my father? I wonder what you'd consider *very* much. Come away from these grinning apes, so I can thank you."

She led him out to her car and still clung to his arm. "It's impossible to thank you," she went on, her voice breaking. "I can't even try. But I'm unutterably grateful. I'll do anything for you."

"Thank you, Miss Stewart."

"My friends call me Majesty," she interrupted sweetly.

"I—I appreciate your excitement and feeling. It's kind of a tough spot for you. I hoped they wouldn't tell you. But they did—and I won't let you make too much of it."

"Too much! Aren't you glad?" she rejoined incredulously.

"Glad? That I was there—with him? Good heavens! Of course, I am. Greatest kick I ever had!"

"Nels told me you were a bad *hombre* to meet in a fight. That you reminded him of an old pard, Nick Steele. But that you were different from the old-time bragging gunmen—modern, modest—a new kind to him, but dangerous, and just what my father needed—just what *I* needed—"

"Nels is a sentimental old jackass," burst out Lance. If she would only let go of his arm, move her soft warm shoulder away from his!

"It bothers you," she asserted quickly. "We'll skip it— Come into town with us."

"Is that an order?"

"Oh, no. Just a request."

"Thanks, but I've plenty of work to do here."

"I'll say plenty! Lance, I hated you yesterday."

"Are you telling me? But really I'm sorry I was so rude."

"I forgive you. Let's be good friends now. You're here, I'm here—and my friends are coming. You'll like the girls. They're peaches. Full of fun—and great sports. It will embarrass me if we are at odds."

"How could that be? I'm only your father's cowboy."

"Don't forget that *I* saw you first," she taunted. "You're *my* cowboy. They'll all make a play for you, especially that redheaded Bu Allen. She's a devil on the make. They'll hear of your—about you—make you a hero. I want you to be good friends with me."

"I will be, of course. A friend like Ren Starr," qualified Lance.

"But I mean more than that. Ren is swell. Only he's a hired hand."

"So am I. I won't forget my place."

"Aren't you being just a little snooty?" she inquired, subtly chang-

ing, and she released his arm.

Lance felt utterly helpless in two conflicting ways—that he simply could not help rubbing the girl the wrong way, any more than he could resist her lovely person and insidious charm. He wanted her to hurry away so that he could think. In another moment she would see that his heart if not his will was prostrate at her feet.

"I'm afraid you had better fire me right here and now," he said glumly.

"Perhaps I had," she returned, her purple eyes glowing upon him, as if visioning afar. "But Dad needs you. And he wouldn't let you go."

"I'd go anyhow. Just you fire me."

"No. I'll not do it. Listen, big boy, you gave me some dirty digs. And I've been catty. It's fifty-fifty. Here's my hand for a new deal."

"Miss Stewart—as Ren says—you're one grand girl," rejoined Lance unsteadily. "It's inconceivable that I could withhold my hand, if you offered yours. But I can't forget so easily as you evidently do."

"I see. You can't take it?"

"Do you still believe I found out who you were—where you lived—and came out here to—to—" he queried hotly, and ended, unable to finish.

"Why, certainly I do."

"When I swear on my word of honor that I didn't?" went on Lance passionately.

"Yes," she retorted, almost with like heat. "And I'd think more of you if you'd not lie about it. This word-of-honor stuff! I thought it was a swell stunt. I was tickled pink. I'd still think it grand of you if you'll only stop bluffing. What more could you want?"

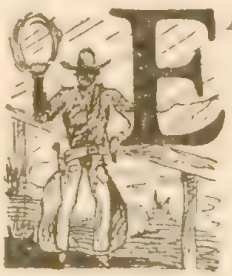
"I must seem ridiculous to you. But I'm neither a callow college youth nor a thick-headed gangster. I'd expect a girl to *believe* me. Else I couldn't be her friend. You're just kidding me. You'd play with me in front of your college crowd—and let me down afterward. Why, you even have nerve enough to try to get my horse!"

"Yes I have, Lance Sidway," she blazed at him. "I've nerve enough to get him, too, at any cost—unless you show yellow and ride away!"

Lance bowed and turned away toward the bunkhouses, forgetting the others and afraid to go to Umpqua. He heard her call to her father, and presently the sound of the cars wheeling away. In that moment of passion he divined if he approached Umpqua it would be to ride away from that ranch. And he flung himself upon his bunk to shut out the sunlight. Neither pride in himself nor loyalty to Stewart accounted for that victory over himself. The paralyzing and staggering truth was that he did not ride away because he could not bear to leave this beautiful and tormenting girl.

Chapter Seven

Tough Break for Madge



EARLY and late, Sidway was out on the road job, overseeing the Mexican day laborers, while Starr and Mains, with the *vaqueros*, repaired the telephone, and then drove upward of 600 head of cattle to the railroad.

No sooner was the road fit for heavy traffic when it appeared all the trucks in Bolton came along, loaded to capacity with the crated furniture and bales and boxes that Madge Stewart had sent from Los Angeles. There were four

small trucks and two large ones. The contents, Lance calculated, must have cost the girl thousands of dollars; and the sight of them aroused an unreasonable resentment in him. What business was it of his? Yet he could not help thinking of her all the day and half the night, That fact lay at the root of his intense dissatisfaction rather than her extravagance at such a hard period for her parents. Lance was determined that Madge must not know this. He was always fighting against an acceptance of her faults.

On Saturday afternoon of that busy week Lance was glad to see Starr drive up with Stewart and Mains in his car, and an empty truck behind.

The road job was finished, very much to Stewart's satisfaction, and he paid off the Mexicans, and sent them back to town.

"Well, I reckon we're ready for Madge's outfit," said Stewart, eyeing his cowboys.

"Who is, Boss?" queried Lance.

"Not me, neither," added Starr, making a wry face. "All summer long! Gene, they'll drive us nuts. An' shore one of them college swells will cop my girl."

"Oh, Bonita, you mean," returned Lance laconically, as he rested against the car. "Ren, I haven't noticed—so much—that she is your property."

"Sid, you double-crossin' son-of-a-gun! I might have knowed it."

"Swell kid!"

"Look heah, Sidway, hev you been after my daughter, too?" demanded Danny Mains.

"Danny," interposed Stewart, "cowboys are the same now as we were. Only a good deal better. I think Bonita is better off for friends like Starr and Sidway."

"Wal, I reckon," agreed Danny dubiously. "On'y I'm afraid they might do some mischief to Bonita's several *vaquero* beaus."

"Mischief! Say, Danny, you ain't got me figgered," replied Ren doggedly. "I love Bonita an' hev asked her to marry me."

"Ren— So that was it?" ejaculated Lance.

"So that was what?" queried Starr suspiciously.

"I don't want to embarrass you here, pard."

"Ren, you'll excuse my cantankerousness," said Mains simply. "I didn't hev you figgered."

"Starr, this here Oregon ladies' man is not only stepping on your preserves, but he's kidding you," rejoined Stewart with a laugh. "Hook her up and let's go. Sidway, it's a good job well done. Oh, yes, I've a message for you by phone. Madge wants you up at the house to open boxes."

"Boss! I'm a tired man," expostulated Lance. "And Umpqua needs to be worked over. Up and down this dusty road for a week!"

"All right. I'll tell Madge not tonight."

Starr grinned knowingly at Lance and drove off. From where they had caught up with him it was only a short ride to the ranch. Yet it seemed a long and thoughtful one for Lance. It began to look as if Madge Stewart either meant to try him with odd stable-boy jobs or else she wanted him to be unable to avoid her, as he had tried so hard to do. The former made him furious and the latter made him weak.

By the time he had put Umpqua away it was dark, the store was closed, and bright light shone from Nels's window and door. A drowsy breeze blew

in from the range, moved down by the cooler air on high. Frogs were croaking in the lake. Lance washed his grimy hands and face before he went in.

"Jest in time, son. Come in an' get it," said Nels cheerily.

"Pard, what say to a swim in the lake after supper? She's bank-full already," suggested Starr.

"Okay by me. But, boy! that water is cold."

"An' you from Oregon!"

It turned out to be warmer water than Lance was used to at home, and he enjoyed the bath. On the way back he realized that Ren had something on his mind. Lance clapped him on the back.

"What's on your chest, buddy?"

"It's Bonita."

"Say, Ren, I was surprised at what you admitted to Danny. I had no idea you were serious. I'm sorry, old man."

"You like Bonita?"

"I'll say. She's some kid."

"Pard, did you kiss and hug her?"

"Ren! Have a heart. Would you expect me to tell?"

"Wal, in my case, yes. You see, pard, I want you to help me win thet kid. I cain't do it alone."

"Okay. Yes I did—a little. But it was no cinch. And I liked her the better. She's a charming girl, Ren. I honestly think she'd make a swell little wife. But there are a lot of guys who're after her, and not all of them with your good intentions."

"Some of them Mexican *vaqueros*."

"Yes. But town fellows, too. And I'm suspicious of them. I've a hunch some of them might know something about that rustling."

"My hunch, too. We'll find out. An' pard—listen! If you'll help me with this black-eyed little girl I'll shore play yore game with yore proud Majesty."

"My God!—Ren, have you gone nutty?"

"Nope. I'm cool as a cucumber right this heah minnit."

"But man! *Me* aspire to that—"

"Why, hell, yes. Pard, I seen her look at you thet day, an' if she's not stuck on you—mebbe unknowin' to herself—then I *am* nutty."

"You are—Ren—you are," replied Lance frantically. "I'll make that Bonita kid think you're a prince. But, pard, forget your pipe dream about the other."

"Faint heart never won fair lady," returned Starr lightly.

"Sidway, are you any good at figures?" asked Stewart after dinner one night. "My accounts are in a tangle. I never was any good at them. Nels can't add two and two to make four. And Starr never went to school."

"Aw, Boss! The hell I didn't. I can read an' write some."

"Stewart, your daughter can, I'll bet. It must have cost you a lot to educate her. Why not make her your bookkeeper?"

"I wouldn't have Madge see what a poor businessman I am for anything. Can you straighten out my accounts for me?"

"Be glad to, Boss. I had a course in bookkeeping. I'm not so hot at it, but ordinary figures are not beyond me."

"Nels, I'll bet our new range hand is hot all around," interposed Starr.

"Ren, he started well. But any fool can start. It's stickin' to the finish that counts."

"Shall I come up right away?" asked Lance.

"No. I'll fetch the books down. I had

to hide them from Madge. She came home full of the Old Nick. She'd be curious, and maybe offended, if she found out about it."

Lance went to his own room. He stumbled over something soft, then ran into a chair that had not been there in the morning. He could not locate his table. Even in the pitch-blackness the room felt different and smelled different.

"What in the deuce has come off?" he muttered, and taking out his matches, he struck one. This colorful clean-smelling room could not be his. Yes, it was—because he heard Nels and Ren talking through the partition. Burning his fingers in his astonishment, he struck another match to light the lamp. But where was his plain, cheap, stinking lamp? Here was a shining one of brass with a big white globe.

Rugs on the floor, curtains at the two windows, a dresser with a fine mirror, pictures on the walls, a new three-quarter bright-blanketed bed where his bunk had been, a washstand with colored ware upon it, and towels the quality of which no cowboy before had ever felt, a comfortable Morris chair beside his table, and—but his roving gaze encountered a striking photograph in a silver frame upon his table. Majesty Stewart! With a groan he took the picture and fell into the chair, to stare down upon the lovely face, the speaking eyes, the bare neck of this girl who had bewitched him.

"Damn you! damn you!" he whispered softly. It seemed a long while before he became aware of whispers and low laughs in Nels's room.

"Hey, pard, air you daid?" came through the wall.

"No! But I wish I were," shouted Lance.

"Why fer, you big stiff? You oughta see my bunkhouse. My Gawd! Pard, what's thet fairy-guy we used to read about when we was kids? Aladdin! Thet's the *hombre*. Wal, he's been here. Nels told me the servants fetched all this truck down today, an' Bonita fixed the rooms up. An' a swell job she did!"

At that juncture Stewart stamped into Nels's room. Lance hid the picture, and hurried out, and into the ranchman's presence.

"Here you are, Jack-of-all-trades," said Stewart gayly, and he opened a ledger on Nels's table. "Balanced proper up to this page and date. And there's a year and more of figures. Sidway, if you make sense of these I'll be obliged."

"I'll hop to it, Boss."

It was near midnight when Lance straightened out those accounts. The last entry was of 730 steers sold at $35 a head—payment not yet received. Among the bank statements, papers, and correspondence were a batch relative to Madge Stewart's income and expenses. Over a period of time a yearly income of $60,000 had diminished until at the present it had shrunk to a few thousands. The correspondence indicated that from time to time bonds and stocks had been transferred from Madeline Stewart's account to that of her daughter.

"Gosh! I wonder if Stewart really meant me to see these," pondered Lance. "All as plain as print! Mother and father sacrificing themselves to the extravagance of spoiled daughter! And she doesn't know it! Can you beat that?"

Lance's troubled mind yielded to the exhaustion of a hard day and toilsome hours with figures, and he slept. Ren's pounding on his door awakened him. After breakfast Stewart appeared and

Lance brought him the ledger.

"All done, sir, and not so bad except for—for these," said Lance. "Accounts, you know, of your daughter."

"*Sidway!* Did I leave them in this book?" ejaculated Stewart, utterly discomfited.

"Evidently you did. Of course, I went over them. I'm sorry, sir."

"If she ever found this out—"

"Stewart, she won't from me," interrupted Lance hurriedly, hoping to relieve the rancher of embarrassment. "And—as for your own accounts, sir—they're not so bad as you led me to believe. When you receive the money for that batch of cattle sold the other day, you can pay your debts and have around five thousand dollars left."

Lance was waiting for Starr the following night at sunset. Inside Nels was banging pans in unusual excitement.

"Pard, what'n hell's wrong with you?" demanded Ren, staring.

"Behold a—a—devastated man!"

"Wal, whatever'n hell thet means you shore air it. So you obeyed them orders?"

"Yes. They were Stewart's."

"An' you had to ride in town with Majesty—all alone—and meet her friends—all them peaches we jest know air comin'—an' be a swell lady's guy?"

"You said it!"

"My Gawd, how tough! Jest the rottenest break ever. Wait till I bed down my hawss an' I'll be ready to be deevasstated."

After supper Ren got up to help Nels with the dishes and he said, "Okay now, pard. Shoot! I reckon I'm strong enough now."

"What do you want to know?"

"Tell us aboot Majesty's outfit."

"Well, the boys are all nice clean-cut college chaps. You'll like them, especially the big football player, Snake Elwell. He's a regular fellow."

"Aw, nix on the fellers. It's the gurls Nels an' me want to heah about."

"Six of them, Ren. *Six!* And they might have been picked for a swell movie. The gang arrived at ten-thirty. They stayed in town until three. Five awful hours! If I performed one job, there were a hundred. They probably were kidding me or Madge, for the whole bunch of crazy women went after me. Poor little me! While the boys hung around Madge. They ate and they drank. Can that crowd lap up the booze? I'm telling you. And they had to see everything and everybody in Bolton."

"Swell. But thet ain't tellin' us how they stacked up."

"Well, here goes—the way I got it. Allie Leland first, evidently Madge's best friend, a slim stylish girl with gray eyes, the peach of the bunch, I'd say, though not in looks. Next Maramee Joyce, brown beauty built like a dream. Next a little southern girl, looks like sixteen but must be twenty-two. Dark, vivacious, with a smile that would drive any man nutty, and a sweet southern accent. Nels will fall for her. Then Pequita Nelson. Part Spanish, Ren. Creamy olive skin, great dreamy sloe-black eyes, willowy and graceful. Blue-blood, pard. Then Selma Thorne, a blonde that, if you never saw Madge, would do the trick. And last, Beulah Allen. Whew! Ren, here's a peach that's a composite of honey, dynamite, and autumn leaves of red and gold. Pretty! Why, she's so pretty I couldn't take my eyes off her. Red-headed, roguish-eyed, and a shape! What's more she's a devil clear down to her toes."

"Pard!" gasped Ren, utterly fascinated. "What'n hell air we up agin'? It was bad enough with only Majesty heah. We shore air a deevasstated outfit."

"Ren, you should have heard the whoop those college tenderfeet let out when they saw Bonita."

"Ahuh: Wal, I'll be liable to shoot a laig off one of them," growled Ren.

Work on the ranch for Lance and Ren, except an occasional and brief overseeing of laborers brought out from town, practically ceased. Their jobs took on manifold aspects. They had to drive and to ride, especially the latter. The only girl guest who knew anything about horses was Dixie Conn. Madge's horses were all too spirited for tenderfeet. Lance and Ren disagreed as to Madge's own ability to handle several of her mounts.

"Say, Ren, you're all wet," protested Lance. "She was a swell horsewoman once. Nels vouched for that. But she has been to college for four years. She's forgotten a lot. Besides, she's out of condition. She's soft, if you get what I mean."

The expression of Starr's face became so peculiar, and a giggle of Bu Allen sounded so gleeful that Lance turned toward the wide stable door. Madge had entered and she had heard him. Likewise had Rollie Stevens and Nate Salisbury, who were with her. The others appeared coming down the lane.

The purple fire in Madge's eyes was no new catastrophe for Lance. As a matter of fact, he had never seen it blaze for anyone or anything except him. Nevertheless, this time, as always, it stimulated him to battle. Perhaps he labored under the delusion that he was right, but so long as he believed so he would not give in.

"Ren, saddle Dervish for me," ordered Madge quietly.

Lance stepped forward and laid an ungentle hand on the cowboy. "Miss Stewart, please forgive my interference. But you should not ride Dervish —just yet. You—he—"

"I heard you express your opinions to Ren," she interrupted in a tone that made Lance feel as if he were the scum of the earth. "You can save your breath."

"That I won't do so long as I am a cowboy on this ranch," replied Lance coolly, as he found himself. "I have a duty here—to your father—and through him to you. Dervish is a bad actor. He has not been worked out. Besides he does not like you, Miss Stewart. It's dangerous for you to mount him."

"Majesty, listen to Sidway," interposed Rollie, his fine face earnest. "That horse looks skittish to me."

Dixie Conn backed up Stevens, and the other girls apparently fell in line.

"Ren, do as you're ordered," said Madge.

"Miss Stewart, your father will hold me responsible if you are thrown."

"So that's it? Thinking of your job! It's not too sure, at that."

Lance gave up, and went back to saddling Pinto. Starr, at Madge's order, led the slender, racy Dervish out of his stall. Lance heard the cowboy curse under his breath. He also heard Allie Leland, and some of the other girls, taking his part against Madge. And Lance's ears burned with something

besides resentment. All these guests of Madge's had been fine to him, and Bu Allen more than friendly. Lance put Pequita Nelson up on Pinto, and hurried on to saddle Leatherstocking. The young men were having the fun of saddling their own horses. Lance liked this bunch of college boys better than he had anticipated.

At last all the girls were up except Madge and she was leading Dervish out into the open. Ren was with her. Lance hurried to get astride Umpqua. The others, except Allie Leland, rode out toward the range.

"Sidway, go with the others," called Madge.

He waited to see her put a foot into Starr's hand and go sailing upon Dervish. She was not in the least afraid of him. There was a red flush in her cheeks, a smoldering fire in her eyes. Lance had to admire her for more than the superb and lovely figure she made on the roan. Then Madge and the Leland girl passed him to join the others. Dervish acted all right, Lance thought, but Madge was holding him in. But could she hold him if he broke into a run or could she stay on if he wanted to pitch? Lance gambled that she would fail in the latter event, anyway. Starr joined him and they loped to catch up with the others.

Once out in the grass and the sage there was much less danger of accidents. The girls had listened to reason, if their hostess had not. And except Dixie Conn, they were all too scared of horses to try any stunts. Dixie and Madge forged ahead, and Lance kept a position that would enable him to overtake Dervish if he bolted. But nothing happened across the sage flat to the pine knoll five miles away. Madge led them up to the top of that, then down, and over the rolling range land toward the foothills. Half an hour of lope and trot brought them to the slope.

"Majesty," screamed Maramee Joyce. "For Pete's sake—hold on! I'm dying!"

"I've got that—awful stitch in my—side," cried Selma Thorne.

"We'll rest," replied Madge merrily. "But how in the world will you girls ever make it up into the mountains?"

At length when they were rested Madge gave the word: "Let's go! And step on it!"

As they swept off with merry screams and shouts Lance, with an eye ever on Dervish, saw that he meant business. He balked. And when Madge laid on the spurs he began to pitch. Lance in a few jumps had Umpqua beside her, but as he reached for the roan's head Madge cried, "Let him alone!"

"But he'll pile you up."

"He will not!"

As bucking horses went, Dervish would have been mean for any rider. But to Lance's surprise Madge stayed in the saddle. Bent double, red-eyed and infuriated, the roan bucked all over the flat, and failed to dislodge the girl. She had her spurs dug into him and sat her saddle as if a part of it.

"You're riding him, cowgirl!" yelled Lance, carried away with her spirit and the spectacle she made.

Then Dervish, succeeding in getting the bit between his teeth, bolted away across the valley, in the opposite direction from the ranch. It took only a glance to see that the roan was a runaway horse and that he would eventually get the best of his rider. Lance spurred Umpqua after him. By now the others were a couple of miles distant toward the ranch, and they were

not yet aware of Madge's predicament.

The roan was fast. Lance had to urge Umpqua into his top speed to gain at all. And he saw that it was going to be a race. Madge fought her mount with all her might. If she heard Lance yell to let the horse run she gave no sign. The girl had evidently been jolted by the bucking, and now she was spending the last of her strength. She would be thrown.

Then, after a grueling run, Lance drew close to the roan. Madge showed signs of distress. She was beginning to sway.

"Drop your bridle!" yelled Lance. "Grab the pommel! Hold on!"

She heard him and obeyed. That saved her from an immediate spill. Umpqua thundered closer and closer until his nose passed the roan's flank. But again Madge was swaying. She was near a fall and the ground was rocky, and rough with hummocks. Desperately goading his horse, Lance gained inch by inch, until he stretched out a clutching hand. She had the sense to shake her feet loose from the stirrups. But that loss of stability broke her seat in the saddle. She was in the air when Lance caught her in a grip of steel and swung her up before him.

"Oh!" she screamed wildly. "You're tearing my flesh!"

Lance let her go, to slip her into the crook of his arm, and hold her across his saddle. Umpqua was excited, too, and hard to slow down.

At length Lance halted the horse and then turned his attention to the girl. Her face lay high up on his left arm, near his shoulder, and it was white. The lipstick on her strained lips made a startling contrast.

"Gosh—I'm—sorry I had to hurt—you," he said haltingly. "But I—couldn't help it. That damned—roan can run. Lucky to catch you—at all."

"How strong you are!" she exclaimed, her eyes, darkly dilated, upon him. "You had the muscles of my back. I'll bet I can't wear my new formals very soon."

"Shall I get down? Can you ride my horse?" asked Lance hurriedly.

"I feel very comfortable where I am. Lance, I deserve it. I was wrong—bullheaded—vain. You were right. Now does that soothe your wounded vanity?"

"My feelings don't count. But I don't remember that vanity entered into it."

"Damn you anyway, cowboy!" she exclaimed broodingly, passionate eyes upon him in speculation.

"That's not very kind," returned Lance, beginning to weaken under another kind of strain. She was resting in his arms, her head now on his shoulder. A little color began to creep into her cheeks. Lance almost collapsed under a terrific longing to kiss her.

"For *you* to be the one always to catch me in the wrong—do me a service! It's a tough break," she lamented.

Chapter Eight

Fatally Damned

THAT night after supper, when Starr, in the next room, was exaggerating the story of Madge's adventure on Dervish, and Lance sat in his big chair gazing at the beautiful photograph, there came a soft step outside and a tap on his door. Hastily hiding the picture of Madge, and with a leap of his heart he called, "Come in."

The door opened to disclose Beulah

Allen on the threshold. She wore a henna gown that matched her hair, cut to expose her creamy arms and neck. Her charm appeared considerably magnified.

"Good evening, Lance. Here I am," she said archly.

Lance awkwardly returned her greeting, then: "So I see. Who's with you?"

"I'm alone. I had a scrap with Snake, so I thought I'd hunt you up."

"Swell—only what'll Snake do to me?"

"He hasn't any strings on me. We've been engaged several times and broken it off as often. Tonight is the last."

Lance had arisen, and now he stood looking at her, fully aware of her seductiveness, and half inclined to yield to it.

"How swell you are here! Madge got a kick out of dolling up these rooms. Isn't she a peach? Always playing Santa Claus!"

"Indeed, she's very kind. Which reminds me—in the excitement today I forgot to thank her."

"She hates to be thanked. Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"No. But I'll come out," replied Lance, and taking his sombrero, he joined her and led her off the porch. She took his arm and remarked that the night and the full moon were made for love.

"Beulah, you're one attractive kid. I like you. I'll be glad to help you with your riding—as you asked me. But don't get me in bad with Snake Elwell. He might beat hell out of me."

"I don't know about that. Snake can run with a football. But he gets hurt easily. Always crippled."

"You little devil!" laughed Lance. "Honest now, isn't Snake in love with you?"

"Yes," she admitted reluctantly. "But he's not alive."

"Beulah, I've met a lot of young fellows. Elwell is not flashy. He's a rough diamond. He's a regular guy. If you liked him well enough to be engaged to him you oughtn't to play fast and loose with him."

"I don't."

"What do you call this? Coming to my quarters after me?"

"Lance, if you must be serious, I came because I felt a little out of it tonight. There's an odd girl, you know. Snake belongs to the same fraternity as the other boys. But I don't belong to Majesty's sorority."

"Oh, I see. But she wouldn't slight you?"

"No. She's a thoroughbred—a real sport. And I'd be crazy about her if she'd let me. She's just a little aloof with me. And I'm as proud as the dickens. So when Snake made me mad, I beat it to you."

"I'm sure flattered. Let's walk down to the village cantina, and have a Mexican cone."

It was dark except for starlight. Lance thought that the ground was hardly uneven enough for Beulah to hang onto him so tightly. But after a while he put his arm around her. When they reached the cantina, with its open vine-covered porch and dim lights, he did not remove his arm in time to escape Bonita's black eyes. She was there with a group of young people, and her escort was a Mexican lad Lance had never seen. He was of the *vaquero* type, a born rider, lithe of form, lean of face, and he had small glittering dark eyes.

As Lance passed the table where they were sitting his keen faculties

grasped Bonita's jealousy and her friend's uneasy lowering of his face. It strengthened his suspicion that some of these admirers of Bonita could have shed some light upon the rustlers.

"Hello, Bonita. Ren is looking for you," hazarded Lance, with a meaning glance. When her dusky eyes dilated widely he knew he had hit some kind of a mark. Before he and Beulah had finished their ice cream, Bonita left with her escort. The incident determined Lance to pay more attention to Danny Mains's pretty daughter.

It developed that Beulah had an intense interest in motion pictures, about which Lance talked at length, and in fact all the way up the hill to the ranch house. She led him in through the corridor to the brightly lighted living-room, where Madge and part of her guests sat at two card tables, and the others grouped around Stewart and his wife. Most of them were dressed in white. Lance had to bear the sight of Madge supremely lovely in filmy blue.

Their entrance put a stop to games and conversation. Beulah, flushed and radiant, made the most of the situation. It invoked various greetings, all full of fun and interest.

"Beulah, you look stunning," observed Madge. "What's your recipe for such glamour? My cowboy! Where'd you pick him up?"

"Oh, Lance came up after me," returned Beulah sweetly. "He took me to the village—for a cone."

"Bu, please surrender Mr. Sidway to me for a little," Madge said abruptly, and approaching Lance she tugged at his sleeve. He allowed himself to be led toward the door.

"Madge, take a coat or wrap, if you're going into the patio," advised her mother.

"There's one in the hammock, Mom."

The patio was silver-bright under a full moon. The fountain tinkled, there was a stir of leaves, and peep of sleepy birds. Madge caught up a white coat from the first hammock and gave it to Lance. He helped her into it, and turned up the wide collar, and buttoned the upper buttons, his fingers clumsy, while she stood still and gazed up at him with eyes he felt but dared not meet. Then she took his arm and led him along the wide porch, where the shadows of foliage played black on the tiles. Lance was helpless in the thrall of the moment.

"Lance, it's coming to you right now—while I'm hot under the spell," declared Madge. "Beulah Allen has fallen for you. They all saw that. I saw it long ago. What did you do to her? She sailed in positively regal. That was for my benefit, Lance Sidway. Only yesterday I told the girls you didn't neck. What a liar you've made me out! They all like you. Dad doesn't throw a fit over every fellow who comes along, not even a cowboy. And Mom! Oh, Lance—Mom likes you! That is the last straw! My lovely patrician mother!"

"She was just—moved by my—my service to you," said Lance unsteadily.

"No. Don't start that stuff. This is serious," she rejoined, and halting beyond the last archway, she turned to him in the white moonlight. In that light, shining from the pale oval of her face, her eyes held the sum of all beauty. "Isn't it a pity—I don't like you?"

"Maybe that is lucky for me," he returned huskily.

"Lance, are you engaged to any girl in Oregon?"

"No—indeed."

"Are you fancy-free?"

"Yes," he lied, glibly enough.

"You made a play for Bonita. Oh, I know. She gave you away—and herself. I was brazen enough to pump her. Lance, do you know Ren Starr has a terrible case on Bonita?"

"I found that out pronto."

"Listen, these college friends of mine, particularly Barg and Nate, are nuts over that little Mexican hussy."

"Bonita isn't quite all that," rejoined Lance stoutly.

"She is. And I'm a jealous cat. But all this is for Ren's sake. You seem to be as big as that mountain there. Are you big enough to play Ren's game—to keep these college devils away from her? They're on the make. One or the other, most likely Nate, will get her."

"I'm afraid I'm not quite so—so big as that," answered Lance, led on and on by the deadly sweetness of her, and by the infernal power of his bleeding vanity.

She released his arm and averted her face. Like a cameo the perfect profile shone as if cut out of marble. The night breeze stirred her golden hair. "I'm disappointed in you—again."

"Why should you be, Miss Stewart?" he queried stiffly, fighting a struggle almost vain. "I'm human—the same as you. Just no good!"

"How dare you!" she cried, wheeling with a startled movement. "Smile—when you say that."

But Lance did not smile. She had wanted to be serious and he had told her the truth. Without a word she left him standing there. Lance stepped into the black shadow of the patio wall, his thoughts whirling, his conscience stinging, his judgment at fault, his love valiantly championing this perverse and wayward beauty. A thousand wild queries did not lodge in his mind, let alone find an answer. There was not any answer to anything. Why had she asked those direct thought-provoking questions? How easy to escape from her if she were only like Beulah! But Madge Stewart had the insidious power to make men believe in her sincerity.

Lance's endless ravings were disrupted by approaching voices. Two people were coming down the patio path. Then Madge's silver laughter, a little mocking, froze Lance to the spot. They came clear to the inside wall.

"Majesty, you drive me mad," came in Rollie Stevens's subdued voice. "You know you have no use for that cowboy. You told me so. Yet for days now you've been rotten to me, on his account! Oh, I get it! Sidway hasn't fallen for you—and that's piqued your vanity. Besides, you want his horse. Why don't you give the fellow a break? He's a real man. He's not a sap. But pretty soon he'll fall for you, even if he knows you're not on the level with him."

"Rollie, I might be in earnest," she scoffed.

"Rot! Why, Majesty Stewart, only a month ago you said you—you might marry me."

"That was a month ago, darling. An age!"

"Majesty, you can't marry a cowboy," he expostulated incredulously.

"Rollie, I hadn't thought of that. But—why couldn't I?"

"You're a lady of quality, a talented girl. Why, he's not of your class. Admitting Sidway is a fine chap—I like him, Majesty—you couldn't marry him. Oh, to talk of it is preposterous."

"All right. Skip it— Rollie! don't kiss me right here in the moonlight."

"I'll bet he did," he returned hoarsely.

"Who?"

"Your cowboy!"

"He never even thought of it."

"Majesty, can you expect me to believe that?"

"No, I don't."

A slight scuffle followed, a protest from the girl, then the soft sounds of kisses.

"Rollie, you needn't tear my clothes off. Pick up my coat. And remember, my back is too sore for hugging."

"Darling—it maddens me—to taste your lips. I'm just wafted—"

"New kind of lipstick! All over your face. And mine too."

"Majesty, honest to God—didn't that Sidway even kiss you?"

"No, Rollie. He didn't even try, I'm ashamed to admit."

"He could have kissed you! All the boys kiss you! It was campus talk!"

"You jealous sap! Surely he could have—and they do. I rather like it. And besides, what's a kiss?"

"You know what it leads to, Majesty Stewart."

"Yeah? Well, it never led me anywhere in particular yet, except to muss my dress and make-up, as you've done."

"I'm sorry. But you drive me wild. Kiss me good night, sweet. A real one, like you used—"

"There, little boy. Let us go back. I am cold."

Then soft footfalls and subdued voices faded away. Lance plunged down the trail like a blind man. He had his answer.

Lance felt inclined to the conviction that it was his careful avoidance of the girls the next few days which kept him out of hot water. Still he had to hear about their mishaps and stunts from Ren, who had been relegated to the job, and who raved rapturously through supper, and then long afterward, to Lance's disgust. It did not help Lance's mood to realize that he listened keenly when he might have gone out of hearing.

On the third night, however, Ren for some reason appeared very glum and silent. Nels ventured a few sly queries. And when Lance added, "Has our poodle had his tail pulled?" Ren stalked out and stamped to his room.

"Wal, he ain't often like thet," said Nels ponderingly. "Reckon one of us ought to make a move, anyhow."

"I'll go, Nels," returned Lance, and lighting a cigarette he went out. Approaching Ren's door and seeing that the light was out, Lance knocked and said:

"Sorry, old man. I was only kidding."

"Shore, I know that. It's okay," replied Ren gruffly.

"Little off your feed, Ren?"

"I reckon. An' I was made out a turrible sucker today!"

"By whom?"

"Wal, who'd you think?"

"Bonita?"

"Thet little hussy! Say, she's lost her haid over them boys. I cain't do a damn thing about it."

"Ren, I laid off Bonita for your sake. Maybe I shouldn't have. She liked me. And I'm your pal, you know."

"You're damn right you shouldn't. Them boys hev been chasin' Bonita an' her friends pretty hard lately, an' unbeknown to Majesty."

"That's not so good, Ren."

"Good!—It's pretty bad, if you ask me."

"Well, I'll walk down and give the kid a spiel, Ren. But, I forgot. Who made the sucker out of you?"

"Never mind now, pard. I don't want

to hear you whoop."

Lance strolled off the long porch across the square, and down the road toward the high wall of poplar trees that marked the village. The night was close and warm. Merry voices up by the lake attested to the presence of night bathers. The strumming of a guitar and the lilt of a Spanish love song suited the summer night.

At the corner Lance turned left to go down the long avenue of poplars. He passed the deserted adobe houses, then the lighted store, and beyond that the noisy cantina. Here there was no one out under the vine-covered trellis. Peeping in, he saw a number of Mexicans, but no girls. Lance crossed the street, and in the deep shadow of the other lane of poplars, he went slowly on toward Danny Mains's house. When he got to the corner he halted in the shadow. The gate was beyond a little ways.

Lance thought he would hang around a little before he went in. There were both lights and music in the Mains's cottage. Presently three bareheaded girls appeared, scarfs round their shoulders. The foremost was Bonita. They hesitated, whispering excitedly, and were evidently expecting someone. When Lance called Bonita she gave a start and then approached slowly, while the other girls hung back. He met her at the gate.

"Hello, kiddo. Where are you going?"

"Oh, *Señor* Lance! I was afraid it might be my brother Manuel– I've–we have a date."

"You look it. Sweet as a wild rose! Bonita, have you gone back on Ren and me?"

"No indeed. But I never see you–and him so seldom. He's jealous. Tries to boss me. I won't stand it, Lance."

"Don't blame you. Has he asked you to marry him yet?"

"He has not," she retorted. "But he did say I was so–so bad he wasn't sure he wanted me to."

"Well, that's a tough one. Bonita, have you been stepping out a little lately?"

"Not so very. Tonight's the first time I've consented to go to town. Francisca and Maria have both been. I'm scared. If Daddy finds it out he'll whip me."

"Stay home. Come with me to see Ren. He's blue. Let the others go."

"Lance, if *you* wanted me for yourself I'd break any date. I'd rather. These young college men are too swift for Bonita Mains."

"Listen, honey. Now don't be a little chump. It's all right to go if you refuse to drink. You'll enjoy the movies and dancing."

"They all drink like fish."

"Right." And Lance laughed at the frank girl. He drew her close to him and kissed her. "Bonita, get a load of this. I like you myself–more than these college guests of Miss Stewart's. But Ren loves you dearly. I know it. And I'd hate to see you two fail to make a go of it. Now be a good kid. Promise me. I'll make a date with you for tomorrow night, like this, so we can talk."

"I promise, Lance," she replied happily, her hands on his arm. "I'll not drink tonight. If you can't patch it up between Ren and me, it'll not be my fault."

"Swell! You're okay, Bonita, and Ren is a crabby old sourdough. We'll fix it– Hello!–a car?"

"They're coming. Perhaps it'd be just as well if you weren't seen."

Lance gave her dark head a pat and hurried back into the shadow of the

trees. But the car did not come close to the house, and Lance could not ascertain to whom it belonged. The girls ran out and were taken in with merry greetings. As the car went on, Lance thought he saw a figure hanging on behind. Presently, being certain of this, he took to the road and strolled down the hill. He knew that if someone had stolen a ride, he would not stick on for long, not on desert roads at the speed these fellows liked.

This car, however, did not appear to open up, until it reached the level valley floor. Lance kept on, presently reaching the level, where the dry wash and the sand made rough going for a space. At length he gave up and was about to turn back when he almost bumped into someone sitting on the low bank of the road. A little peal of silvery laughter magnified his start.

"Lance Sidway! I was just gambling with myself how soon you'd arrive," said Madge Stewart.

"Well, I'm damned!"

"So am I. Fatally damned to have *you* get me out of every scrape."

"That's a tough break. You're not alone?"

"Yes, I am. Allie was in the plot with me. She was to hang onto the other side. Either she did not get on or she was jolted off. You didn't see her along the road?"

"No. She couldn't have come. I saw only one person hanging on the back of that car."

"You saw me? When?"

"When the car stopped outside Mains's house. I was with Bonita. The other girls waited in the yard."

"Oh! I see. Johnny on the spot! Did you get who the boys were?"

"No. That didn't interest me particularly. Bonita told me these boys were too swift for her. What Bonita does is probably none of my affair, but I am interested because of Ren. So I urged her not to drink and she said she wouldn't. Bonita is easily influenced if you go about it right. I've been Ren's friend, with her, if you know what I mean."

"I didn't until now," returned Madge bluntly. "We girls thought the boys were going to the cantina with the girls. I think it lousy of them, especially of Barg Hillcote. Just engaged to Maramee! There I go spilling my insides— Lance Sidway, men are all rotten."

"Yeah!" answered Lance uncertainly. She had begun to strike him rather singularly, as she had not moved, and she sat leaning back on both hands with one leg up over the bank. In the starlight he could see her lovely face and speaking eyes.

"What's wrong with you?" Lance said suddenly, and he leaned close to Madge, peering at her.

"Guess I got hurt," she replied, with great inscrutable eyes meeting his.

"Where?"

"My foot. This one. Thought at first I'd sprained my ankle. But I'm not sure."

"Let me see." Lance stepped up on the bank and knelt. She had taken off her shoe and stocking. Her white foot and leg gleamed in the starlight.

"Don't touch it!" she cried. But he went right on until she screamed out.

"All right, all right, touchy! Let me see you move it—flex it!"

"Oh, I can do that. It doesn't hurt."

"Your ankle is okay. You've sprained your instep—or something. But if you keep off it and use hot water frequently, you'll be all right tomorrow or next day."

"I'll have to walk back home."

"No you won't. You can't. Let me get your car."

"But I don't want anyone to know about this, and they will if I come in the car. I'll have to sneak in by the west wing to my room. I'll have to walk."

"Nonsense. I can easily carry you."

She laughed outrageously.

"But I can. I'm strong," protested Lance, earnest, amazed, solicitous. "I can throw a hundred-pound sack of grain all over the place."

"Strong? I know you're a perfect Hercules, Mr. Sidway," she said tauntingly. "But I won't have you packing me around."

Very carefully she stepped, and moved up the slope. Every time her injured foot touched the ground it must have pained greatly, Lance knew. He put a hand under her arm and half lifted her along. They came into a trail, and that appeared to be easier for Madge. When they arrived at the pines, however, she was tottering. But this girl was the kind that could not quit.

"Why won't you let me carry you?" he asked suddenly. "You did once."

"That's why."

When she started on, Lance knew she would not make it much farther. And he bided his time, hot and perplexed. Finally she swore and sobbed almost in the same breath. Without a word more, he picked her up in his arms and went on. Shifting his hold, so she would carry more comfortably for her, he said:

"There. Isn't that better? I hardly feel your weight."

"Better, indeed. But I fear—riskier," she returned in a queer voice.

Lance had to look at her. Before that, all had seemed well. He was relieved to save her pain. Her face lay high up on his right arm, almost on his breast, turned toward him somewhat, and its lovely proximity grew suddenly exciting. She was looking at him with eyes whose expression he could not fathom.

"Riskier! What do you mean?" he demanded.

"You see I am utterly helpless. You might get a caveman notion. Really that wouldn't be so bad. But you probably just kissed Bonita—"

"I did. For Ren's sake—mostly."

"Ye gods and little fishes! And no doubt it was Bu Allen last night. She came in with her lipstick all smeared up. Radiant. Bold as the very devil. And she didn't deny it when we kidded her about you."

"Miss Stewart, I did not see her last night," protested Lance.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, can the 'Miss.' It doesn't sound natural. And well, if you *had* been with Bu, you'd have kissed her, wouldn't you?"

"That would have depended entirely upon her."

"How chivalrous! If she had been suffering for contact or release—or what have you, why you'd have been a perfect necker. Lance, you give me a pain in the neck."

Anger and intense mortification, and some other emotion began to augment in Lance's consciousness. He sat down on a boulder to regain his equilibrium, but he did not let go of Madge. He could feel the throb of her against his throbbing. And all at once he happened to think of what she had told Rollie the other night. Under the galvanizing stress of the idea that leaped out of it, he arose like a giant and a fiend. He wrapped his long arms closer about her and drew her wholly against his breast. Madge seemed totally calm.

Then Lance kissed her, not with any particular feeling, but merely as a preliminary.

"I thought it was about time," muttered Madge.

Then, staggering on under the pines, he kissed her cheeks, her eyes, her hair, her neck—and when at last she protested, Lance stopped her mouth with his, in an endless passionate kiss which magnified all he had ever bestowed in his life.

"Damn—you!" she panted, as he moved a moment to breathe. And she began to pound him—to tear at his hair. "You insult me—"

"Insult *you!* Good God—it—couldn't—be—done," he mocked her breathlessly. "I heard you say—you rather liked it—"

"You—*what?*"

"Mine ought to be—as good as any of those guys—and cleaner, by heaven! and fresher—from lack of promiscuous practice." And bending over, squeezing her face up immovably, he began to kiss her lips like a madman. His kisses choked off her scream. After one frantic and tense struggle she collapsed in his arms. And he kissed her for every step, on under the pines, out upon the drive, almost to the front archway.

Keeping outside the drive, he passed this, and once in the shrubbery he began again his ravenous tasting of her lips, as if his appetite grew with what it fed upon. But not until he rounded the west wing and reached her window did he realize that her face, her lips, her body had changed. Her eyes were closed tightly—heavy eyelids dreamy, long curled lashes on her cheeks; her lips bowed, open, sweet with a strange fire; her breast pressed on his. Not until Lance lifted her into the open window did he realize that she had an arm round his neck. He lowered her carefully to the floor. Then he leaned on the sill, spent and devastated.

She stirred, and sat up, and laboriously climbed upon the bed. Lance, watching her, expected, yearned for a scourging, bitter enough even for him. But she just looked at him. In the starlight he saw her face as only he would carry it in his heart forever.

"Majesty," he began in a husky whisper, "I—" but he could not go on.

Chapter Nine

"The Biggest Party Ever"

MAJESTY soon realized that his passionate kisses had awakened in her a feeling that was new. She knew now that she loved him, but still she sensed that Lance himself was torn two ways. He wanted her, and yet he could not help but disapprove of her way of life. That way of life was palling now on Madge herself, but, with a streak of perversity still strong within her, she kept the gay pace going as summer wore on.

It had been her idea to cap the season with a trip to the wild fastness up in the Peloncillo Hills, famous as a stronghold of the great Apache chief, Cochise. Now she was cooling toward the idea, looking for a good excuse to end the summer early and send her guests packing. She recalled that the trail was an arduous one, and so sent Ren and Lance to go over it and report as to the advisability of a bunch of tenderfeet attempting it.

It chanced that Madge's wish to see Sidway and Starr upon their return, before any of her friends, was denied her, much to her concern. She had been

alone with her mother when word came up from below that the boys were in. Madge rushed out the patio way and down the trail. A confusion of bright colors decorating Nels's porch attested to the whereabouts of the girls, and where they were the boys would be also. It was a good long run, and Madge had to halt to catch her breath before she half crossed the square.

The horses had just been unloaded from the trucks, and the packs thrown out. Ren was surrounded by her excited friends, who were evidently besieging him in unison. Sidway stood a little apart, conversing with Nels and her father. The *vaqueros* were attending to the horses. Umpqua nickered at Madge, and she flew to stroke his dusty neck, while he nosed at her for sugar. She had never ridden him since that first day, but she had won his affection, and she felt a sense of guilt to look up and see Sidway's piercing eyes upon her. Ragged and dark, dusty and unshaved, he appealed so powerfully to Madge that as she approached them she wondered how she could hide it.

"Majesty, they won't say a darn thing," burst out Maramee, and the others chimed in with gay sallies.

At last Madge reached them, and with a hand on Stewart's arm, she faced Sidway and the grinning Starr.

"Boys—it took you—long enough," she panted, and smiled upon them.

"Wal, Miss Majesty, you gave us all the time there was," replied Ren.

Sidway's hazel eyes, dark and intent, appeared to pierce through Madge. Not for weeks had she met his full gaze like this, and despite the scattering of her wits, she realized the searching nature of his look, as if he were striving to divine her wishes.

"Miss Stewart, it was well you sent us," said Sidway simply. "I'm sure it spared you and your friends a real ordeal!"

A groan run through the listening party.

"Real ordeal! What do you mean?"

"Too severe a physical strain for tenderfeet. A motion-picture crowd would shy at this one—and they do things—But it can be done, Miss Stewart, and I'm bound to admit, it'd be the trip of a lifetime."

"You don't advise it?"

"I do not."

"Would you take the responsibility if I insisted?" asked Madge.

"Yes, if your father insisted, too."

"Dad, are you with me?"

"Daughter, this issue is between you and Sidway. He has not told me a thing. My advice is to listen *before* you make up your mind. You know how you are, Madge."

Madge transfixed Sidway with a troubled, passionate gaze. She did not want to undertake this trip. She rejoiced that Sidway was making it impossible. But there was something about him that dared her to see if she could prevail upon him. She realized that until she could conquer such weakness, she would never be at her best with him.

"Lance, you're on the spot," she said.

"Heavens, when haven't I been?" he ejaculated, and joined Stewart in a laugh. Their understanding and good feeling seemed manifest. Then he bent a glance upon Madge, so clear, so frank, yet so supremely doubtful of her, that she writhed inwardly under it. She divined a thrust aimed at what must be his conviction of a vulnerable point in her which she had no knowledge at all

she possessed.

"Shoot!" she said, with all her disdain.

"It may seem superfluous—to you," he said coolly. "But have you considered the expense?"

"Expense!" echoed Madge. That was the last question she would have expected.

"Yes. Perhaps you have not thought of that."

"I had not. Usually I don't consider what my plans cost."

"Exactly. That is why I presume to mention it. This trip would cost a great deal. A gang of laborers would be needed on the trail. Two weeks' work at least. The cabin up at Cochise's stronghold has gone to rack and ruin. It would have to be repaired. There are no tents and tarpaulins at the ranch, nor cooking-utensils. You would require complete new camping-equipment. We have pack saddles for only a few horses; and, well, would you expect to have this camp on the scale on which you do everything?"

"I'm afraid I would."

"Of course. Then it would be necessary to buy twenty new pack saddles and at least ten pack animals. That would entail hiring half a dozen extra riders. So you see, Miss Stewart, it is quite a big undertaking."

"I see, all right," replied Madge dubiously.

To the credit of her friends, they at once turned thumbs down upon the whole proposition, and were so nice and fine about it that Madge regretted her subterfuge. But what was Lance Sidway aiming at? She believed his report implicitly. A half or a quarter of these obstacles would have sufficed. He believed that no matter how unfavorable his report or how exorbitantly the trip would cost, she would decide to go, willy-nilly. Then he believed other things that mystified Madge. For an instant she had a bothersome thought that he might feel contempt for her because expense had never meant anything to her.

A rebellious impulse to do the very thing he expected died in its infancy, somehow hastened to its death by the singular, almost mocking light in Sidway's hazel eyes. In a flash she saw how she could amaze and undeceive him.

"Thank you, Sidway. I'll abandon the camping trip solely upon your report," she said. "You have been very conscientious and dependable. I appreciate it."

If Lance's scarcely veiled surprise proved Madge's intuition close to correct, his relief and gladness, that warmed out the coldness of his face, had augmented the thought-provoking power of that moment. Madge conceived, too, an impression that Sidway's feelings were reflected in her father's dark face. Could these two possibly have an understanding? Madge drove the perplexing thought away.

"Friends, it's off, our mad ride up into the wilds," declared Madge. "Some other summer! Instead I'll throw the biggest party ever."

Madge set the date for the party. Invitations were sent to all the range people her father knew from Douglas to Bolton. All the *vaqueros* and *señoritas* known to Bonita and her brothers were invited. It took a whole day to put up the decorations. That night, when Madge tried out the colored lights and lanterns, the glamorous effect transported even her. Next morning the caterer rolled in with his trucks

and minions, and Majesty's Rancho hummed like a beehive. Last to arrive were the 16 musicians. That was early in the afternoon.

Madge went to bed to rest, but she could not sleep. The girls could not even rest. They were in and out all afternoon, and finally when Madge asked Allie to get out a new gown none of them had ever seen, and which she had reserved for this occasion, there ensued a perfectly rapt silence. Bu Allen, of course, broke it.

"How exquisite!" she gasped in uncontrollable excitement. "Majesty, you must be married in that!"

"Bu, a girl has to have something beside a gown to get married."

"Not that one. You don't even need a slip."

And so mad were they all that only Madge noted the omission of a man. The thing struck a fatalistic chord in her. She had everything—wonderful parents, lovely friends, wealth, education, ranch, horses, cars, all to make any girl happy—except a man to marry.

But that was the last thing in the world to occupy her mind now. Anyway it was a calamity she could remedy this very night, provided she beat down her obsession for one unappreciative, unresponsive cowboy. Still it had been ingrained in Madge's girlish dreams that no one save a cowboy like her father could ever have her.

Toward the end of that long day Madge slept, and was awakened by Allie and Maramee. They informed her that the lights were lit, the many tables set, and guests were arriving. Madge sent them off to dress and flew to her bath. She was in the midst of her make-up task when they returned, formal and elegant, to draw encomiums from Madge.

"Girls, we'll knock 'em for a loop tonight," said Madge gleefully.

"We?" chirped Maramee.

"Yes, us," declared Madge.

"Darling, I think you mean him," retorted Allie.

They brushed her hair until it sparkled with glints of fire, and then by some magic of deft feminine hands they incased her in the blue and gold gown. For jewels Madge wore a string of pearls, the gift of her Aunt Helen, so beautiful and valuable that she had not risked it out of the safe for years. Allie was silent, gazing raptly at her, but Maramee raved on and on.

"Once in my life!" was all Madge whispered to the image shining from her long mirror, and either she meant that she was satisfied or that she would play that beauty to the limit.

She went to her mother's room, to be admitted. Her father was there, lean and dark and handsome in his black suit.

"Oh, Mom, but you are a lady of quality!" cried Madge, a rush of warm sweetness piercing her trance. "Dad, isn't she just stunning?"

Both her father and mother appeared incapable of speech on the moment, but their eyes would have gratified a far vainer girl than Madge. "I wanted you to see me first." And she whirled for their benefit. "Now, darlings, this is my party. I've had it coming to my crowd for a year. Unknown to them it is my farewell to them—to college—to that kind of life. Whatever we do, don't be shocked."

And she ran out, through the living-room, into the corridor where she encountered Sidway. In his dark garb he looked so slim and different that she did not recognize him at first glance.

"Oh!—how stupid of me! It's Lance."

And she halted under the colored lights.

He started and backed partly against the balustrade, while a dazed and frowning expression altered his face. Then it vanished as he leaped erect, to utter a queer little laugh and make her a profound bow.

"Lance. Do you—like me?" she queried softly.

"Majesty, I used to believe you were a mistake of evolution, but now I know it was God."

"Is that a compliment or a slam?"

"Pardon me. I'm in urgent search of your father. I just found out that the balance of his cattle herd was just rustled. And I'm going to find out who stole them and where they were driven."

"Oh, Lance, how dreadful. But must you tell him tonight?" wailed Madge.

"Come to think of it, no," he returned brightly. "I haven't even told Ren. Poor kid! It's going tough with him. Love is a terrible thing!"

"It is indeed," agreed Madge fervently. "But *you* have merely heard or read about that."

She left him, sailing with a swish down the corridor to her room. She had no time to deduce sense from Lance Sidway's queer remarks, and she was glad of it. If she spent ten minutes with that cowboy there would be no triumph for her tonight. What a devastating effect he exercised over her!

Some of the girls were in her rooms and the others soon paraded in. Every last one of them had on a new gown. They were interrupted by the caterer, a handsome Italian in immaculate white. Madge admitted him and drove out the girls.

"Find the boys. I'll be with you in a moment."

"I hope you are please'," he said, rubbing his hands together.

"Corvalo, I'm bound to be. Remember, serve champagne to my party in the living-room. Wine to the other tables. As for the punch, it must have an awful wallop. But not an immediate kick. Use creme de menthe to flavor only—to make them like it—leading them on. A soft, sweet, tasty punch—flowers and music leading to a precipice. Get me, Corvalo?"

He departed with shining eyes and beaming face, as if that order had been one to his liking. Madge went in search of her friends. They had rounded up the boys, who looked cool and natty in white flannels. Their various comments were incense to Madge's heart. Rollie Stevens said, "Murder in the Rue Rancho this night!"

The great dinner gong pealed through the corridors and the patio, and was followed by a merry hum. Then the orchestra upon which Madge put such store pealed its exotic music through the house. It heralded the Spanish *fiesta* that was to last until dawn.

Madge, with her college guests and her father and mother, sat down to dinner in the living-room. That table, from its hothouse orchids, its silver plate and crystal, to the rare and savory dishes of the sumptuous dinner, excelled anything the ranch had ever known.

Madge's keen eyes did not miss anything. Once she saw Sidway and Starr, flushed of face and fire-eyed, peep into the living-room. She also observed that her father did not drink his champagne. With dinner at an end, the dancing set in continuously, with only short intermissions. Madge loved to dance, and the first hour passed by on wings.

When her crowd happened to congregate, someone remembered the punch, whereupon they flocked to the living-room. The long table had been cleared, and moved back to the wall. In the center an enormous bowl of silver and crystal shone resplendent, full of a twinkling liquid that had life and color. An attendant stood ready to serve. Curious and gleeful, Madge drained her cup, tasted and wondered, and listened for comments. She alone knew that innocent-looking punch was loaded with dynamite.

"Say, Madge, where'd you hit on this concoction? Pretty nifty," observed Rollie Stevens, who considered himself a connoisseur.

"New to me, Rollie."

"Soft and minty," interposed Brand. "I'll bet it'll lead you on."

"Tame, if you ask me," said Allie loftily, and that from her was a source for mirth. Allie could not stand liquor at all.

"Swell punch," observed Elwell. "What do you say, Bu?"

"Hand me another," replied the redhead.

"Majesty, are you kidding us with this stuff?"

"I'm sorry, Brand. But this is my home, you know. And remembering your capacities I wanted something weak."

"Weak or not, let's have another."

Madge finally dragged her friends out. While dancing and resting the next hour she contrived to keep tabs on that punch bowl. Just as she had suspected, her friends were succumbing to this insidious drink.

Rollie, with more drinks than were good for him, had begun to grow demanding and bossy. Soon came an added interest in Sidway's presence upon the floor. He was taller than her college friends, slim and erect in his black suit, broad-shouldered, quite the handsomest boy there. He had started in dancing with Bonita, and from her to Bu Allen was only a short step. Then he cut in on the boys and apparently enjoyed thoroughly her girl friends.

Naturally Madge expected him to gravitate to her. But he did not approach her or look at her, an omission that did not go unnoticed. It was rude of him, Madge thought, as she was his hostess, but it seemed between them there was no observance of rules. From that hour Madge's feelings of happiness underwent a change. Visits to the punch bowl kept up her spirits.

By midnight some kind of a climax seemed imminent. Her father and his friends, despite their visits to the living-room were still steady on their feet. Stewart appeared to have lost his gaiety. Madge saw her mother apparently remonstrating with him, to no avail. Thereafter Madge did not see her mother. Madge was glad and she hoped her father would retire soon. There would be no fights such as Stewart had know in the early days, when he was *El Capitan*, but Madge knew something was bound to happen, and she repented now that she had been responsible for it.

It came in the nature of a surprise. Bu Allen sat down on the floor, a cup of punch in her hand, and turned a somersault. She did not spill any liquor. The boys and girls howled at the sight. Thus encouraged, she turned somersaults all across the living-room. Nels and Danny Mains were in hysterics; Ren Starr whooped like the cowboy he was; Sidway strode out of the room. Stewart, his face like a thundercloud, threw up his hands like a man

who had been vainly fighting facts, and lunged out into the patio.

Madge, frightened at the lightning of his eyes, watched him disappear with a sinking of her heart. Had she gone too far? But she had not known Beulah Allen would disgrace her party. And if Snake Elwell had not violently jerked the girl to her feet and dragged her out, Madge felt that she would have had to adopt extreme measures. That event saw the disintegration of the party. The dancing grew desultory, except in the patio where the range guests still held forth.

Finding Barg and Maramee asleep in each other's arms in a corner, and some of the other couples fading from the living-room to the benches, Madge realized her party was about over. And it had been a failure. She knew when she had had enough to drink. But in her bitterness, she overstepped her habit. With Rollie, she drank two more cups of punch. And as she went outdoors with him, wrapping a mantle around her bare shoulders she realized two things—that Rollie was pretty drunk and that a gaiety had overcome her gloom.

Good to have the blue devils fade away! Lance Sidway had not come near her! To hell with him! Rollie was a pal, and on the way out under the pines, Madge not only permitted his extravagant embraces but returned his kisses. She felt just on the verge of being giddy and dizzy. But she did not want to think. After all, she could do worse than marry Rollie Stevens.

In an open space, shaded by spreading pines and surrounded by low foliage, they found a bench covered with blankets and pillows. The moonlight streaked through rifts in the branches to lend a silver glamour to the glade. Rollie sat down and drew Madge upon his lap. At first she felt silly and soft at his love-making, and experienced a pleasant glow of excitement.

"You're going to marry me," he said thickly, between kisses.

"Is that so? Who told you?" laughed Madge.

"I'm telling you," he replied more violently.

"Rollie, you're drunk."

"If I am it's your fault."

The edge on his voice, accompanying some rough handling of her, awakened Madge to the situation. But her lackadaisical good nature was such that she made only feeble resistance to his ardor.

"You love me—don't you?" he demanded fiercely.

"'Course I love you—Rollie—as a pal—old friend, and what have you? But—"

"Nuts! I'm tired of that dope." And the hot kisses upon her mouth and neck grew more violent. Madge was no longer returning his kisses. From that to remonstrating with him was only a short step. It appeared to inflame him. Locked in his arms, she was at a disadvantage. A rattling of her pearls alarmed her. The fool would break the necklace!

"Let me—go! You're drunk—boy. This is—"

"So're you—drunk," he panted, and pushed her back off his lap upon the cushions. Madge's utterance was stifled by his kisses. She twisted her face away. But Rollie only grew more violent.

Furiously she flung him aside, and sprang off the bench. In the dark she fell over someone she took to be Rollie and had to clutch his arm to regain her balance. He appeared to be sitting against a tree trunk. But there at the

end of the bench was Rollie, mumbling and cursing.

"Oh! — What? — *Who?*" screamed Madge, leaning forward on her knees to peer at this man she had fallen against. She recognized Lance Sidway.

She managed to arise despite a paralyzing dismay, that then gave place to a terrific shame and rage.

"*You!*" burst out Madge.

He rose rather slowly and pulled himself erect. A slant of moonlight fell across his face. It was ashen white, and out of it glittered eyes as black as coal and as sharp as daggers.

"Yeah, it's me. Who else in hell could have such rotten luck?" he returned with exceeding bitterness.

"Lance Sidway! You waylaid me!"

"Don't flatter yourself," he flashed hotly. "I'd left your drunken outfit. On the way to my lodgings, I stopped here to—to smoke. But after I'd finished, I lingered, like the sap I am. I saw you coming and made sure you'd pass. But you didn't. Ha! Ha!"

"Oh, you lie! And you laugh at me!" exclaimed Madge, beside herself with rage.

"No, I don't lie," he retorted. "But I've the laugh on you, Madge Stewart."

Rollie had clambered up, hanging to the bench, evidently more than ever under the influence of liquor.

"Whosis?"

"Rollie, it's Lance Sidway. He was sitting here all the time," declared Madge.

"That cowboy sap? Conceited jackass! Look here, sir, you spy on *me*, I'll cane the hide off you," shouted Stevens, and he struck openhanded at Sidway.

"Keep your hands off me," ordered the cowboy, shoving him back. "I'm sorry. But I wasn't to blame. I didn't spy on you. You get that?"

"You—insufferable cowhand!" shouted Stevens furiously, and he struck Lance twice in the face.

"Okay, Rollie. Now let's see if you can take it," rejoined Sidway grimly, and he swung hard on the collegian. The blow sounded solid, meaty, and Stevens went down with a thud and did not move.

"There! Sorry to mess up your lover, Miss Stewart, but as you saw, I couldn't avoid it."

"He lies so still—he's so white," cried Madge in alarm.

"I hope the sucker croaks," rejoined Sidway brutally.

"What'll I do?"

"Well, you might hunt up your dad and Nels, tell them what this guy tried to do to you—and watch them hang him."

"What a beast you are, Lance Sidway! It was bad enough to sit there, like a cheap eavesdropper, and listen, let alone—"

"Hell! I tell you I'm innocent. I didn't look. I didn't listen—at least until you got so raw in your love-making—"

"Rollie forgot himself—I confess—but I didn't—"

"Bah! Why, for a real man you'd have been a push-over," retorted Sidway hoarsely.

Madge slapped him viciously across the lips. The next instant his open hand cracked along her cheek and head, and but for the bench would have upset her. Nevertheless, almost blinded by stars and shock, Madge slapped him again, with all her might.

"Regular cat, eh?" he burst out huskily. "But you can't make a dog out of me."

"I—don't—have—to—" panted Madge.

He seized her in powerful hands,

hard and hot, and dragged her into a ray of moonlight.

"Majesty – what a travesty that name is!–Madge Stewart, you're going to hear the truth once in your life."

He was suddenly so strangely different, so grimly righteous and ruthless, so white and fire-eyed that Madge sustained a sinking of her heart. She tried to retort with some further insult, but failed of coherence. He shook her violently.

"Majesty Stewart! One swell girl, they all think. Proud, blue-blooded, rich. What a mistake! Why you are as false as hell. It was low-down enough before I caught you tonight. Thank God it was I instead of your dad who caught you. He's had enough of you to stand."

"Sidway, what do you–mean?" whispered Madge, and slipping out of his nerveless grasp, she sank upon the bench.

"I mean your splendid father and your loving mother are too damn good for you, Madge Stewart."

"Lance, I–I know that."

"But you don't know what you've put them through."

"Oh! Not–not money trouble?"

"Yes, money!" he bit out, bending over her.

Madge moaned. This it was then that had vaguely haunted her, the conscience which she would not face. She felt it in this man's intensity, in the bitterness of his voice, the fire of contempt in his eyes. This something had given him power over her, and her spirit seemed to be fainting.

"It's fate that I have to tell you this," he went on swiftly. "Your dad gave me his books to straighten out. He did not know that in the book he had left your bank statements, checks and what-not. I went over these, too. And that is how I learned of your rotten extravagance and the way your parents have ruined themselves for you."

"*Oh!* Lance!–don't–*don't!* You are furious with me. I–I don't blame you. But for mercy's sake, don't say any more–"

"Listen, girl, I couldn't say enough," he interrupted, adamant to the piteous fear in her appeal. "I love your dad. He makes me remember my own father. And your mother–how sweet and loving and thoroughbred! All for Majesty. That has been the whole story of this ranch.

"Madge Stewart, you're not rich. You have no income any more. Three years ago it flopped. And these parents of yours have let you go on, spending like a drunken sailor, deceiving yourself, sacrificing them for your college career, your clothes and cars, your cocktail dates with gangsters– My God! That is the limit! And this party of yours, Miss Stewart, this rare and exotic *fiesta* to your glory–you have pulled it when you were broke. And your dad rounded up the last of his cattle to sell–to cover your debts. And tonight when the whole country was doing you honor, dancing to your jazz, drinking your wines and punch–that last herd was rustled."

Madge sank down to hide her face in the pillows. The blow had fallen. And of all blows it was the mortal one which could crush her.

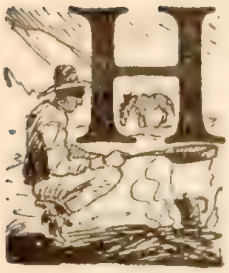
"And now, angel-face," whispered Sidway, almost spent, "your father is ruined–and who'll pay for this party? Would you like Nels and Ren and me to chip in our savings–"

Madge stretched out a shaking importunate hand that silenced him. And, amidst the knell of pride and happi-

ness that had fallen in ruins about her, she heard Sidway's swift footfalls fading away.

Chapter Ten

Trail to Disaster



HALFWAY down the slope, Lance halted in his blind hurry. The Spanish music floated softly on the still air; the full moon soared pitilessly white. What was it that he had done? He sat down under a pine and battled with his conflicting emotions.

Brutally he had made impossible any longer stay at Stewart's ranch. That long-deferred break seemed an unutterable and immense relief. But his conscience flayed him.

He was glad that he had had the courage to tell her. If she had a grain of good in her the truth would bring it out. Then why this stab in his heart, this clamor of furies in his ears, this still small voice? He would have wanted to tell her like an impassive destiny, letting the iron consequences fall. And he had sunk to the level of a man like Uhl. Perhaps even that philanderer would have been more of a gentleman. Lance struck the low of misery.

Then, attending to his smarting lip, he found it cut and bleeding. How about that? And the stinging blows might as well have been re-enacted. He had struck her, a hard openhanded slap that had staggered her. Suddenly it all flashed clear. Jealousy had been at the root of that incredible passion. Loving Madge Stewart to distraction, his damnable fate had been to be compelled to cower there in the shadow, seeing, hearing the kisses she had lavished on that college fellow.

Lance tried to blot out the sight. That had seemed a sickening mortal blow, but it was his vile speech to her that stuck like a hot blade in his side—the jealous false word for which she had struck him across the lips. At last Lance uncovered the real trouble.

"Rotten of me!" he muttered, under his breath. "My God, how terrible she made me feel! But even half drunk she could take care of herself. I saw that. Yet I— Jealousy made me low-down. If she had been kissing *me*—it would have been heaven. A tough spot for Lance Sidway! Well, Madge, whatever else you are, you're straight—and I can climb out of hell on that."

Lance stood up, shivering a little at the cool air and the indifferent stars. This was the end of his secret love affair. And there would never be another, he was certain. It did not seem possible that any man, much less he, could see Madge Stewart as he had seen her, and carry her in his arms, and kiss her with such abandon, and then fall in love with another woman.

Lance strode down to the bunkhouse, his mind trying to take up the threads of the information he had forced from Bonita. There was a light in Nels's cabin. Lance's watch said that morning was less than an hour away. He burst in upon the old cattleman, who was in the act of undressing.

"Nels, are you sober?" demanded Lance.

"Hello, son, what's ailin' you—all white an' eyes a-burnin'?"

"Hell to pay, Nels. Are you sober enough to get me straight?"

"Sober? Doggone! I don't know. Thet shore was some punch. I jest couldn't stop drinkin' it."

"Swell drink, all right. What'd it do

to Danny and Ren and Stewart?"

"Wal, they cleaned oot the bowl. Gene said it was an act of charity on their part. *He* was sober. Gene used to hold more bad likker than any man on the range. But Danny an' Ren were lit up some– Say, what you got on yore chest?"

"Plenty! Now, listen. Pack me some biscuits, meat, dried apples–anything you can dig up pronto. Put it in a saddlebag. I'll wrangle my horse. And you be sure you sober up while I'm gone." Lance looked at the old man.

"Son, I reckon I savvy," drawled Nels.

Lance went into his cabin, and hastily changed into his riding-garb, buckled on his gun belt, and hurried out, to jerk a bridle off a peg on the porch. The night before, because of the strange horses that had arrived, Lance had put Umpqua in the barn. The moment Lance's step sounded on the runway, Umpqua nickered, and stamped his hoofs. Lance looped the bridle round his neck, led him out, and filling a nosebag with grain, he put that over Umpqua's head. Then, leading the horse, he hurried back to Nels's cabin. There he saddled Umpqua, but left the cinch loose. He decided before seeing Nels to go into his cabin, thinking hard what to take. It was necessary to light the lamp. A blanket, his fleece-lined coat, his rifle and some shells, his gloves, money, and matches–these he thought would be about all.

Then he remembered Madge's photograph. He would take that, for the chances were against his returning, or ever seeing her again. Fortunately the picture fit inside his coat pocket. He wrapped it in a silk scarf and carefully put it away. Funny, he thought, if a rustler's bullet pierced that lovely likeness of Majesty Stewart before it pierced his heart! But even so it could not hurt any more than she had hurt him. Then he extinguished the lamp and went out. The east was breaking gray. Dawn was not far off.

Umpqua was pitching the nosebag to get the last of the grain.

"Nels, come out," he called.

"Heah I am. Been waitin', son, kinda worried."

"Thanks, Nels," replied Lance, receiving the saddlebags. "Nothing to worry about–much."

"No. Wal, you act kinda queer. I've spent my life with range fellers. An' if you're not drunk on thet punch, you're shore drunk on somethin'."

"Yeh? Well, what, old wiz?" rejoined Lance, his swift hands at work over the saddle.

"You're leavin' Majesty's Rancho."

"Ha! Gee, Nels, you're keen."

"An' on account of Majesty?"

"Yes, on account of Majesty!" ejaculated Lance flippantly.

"Aw! Did you quarrel?"

"Look where she split my lip. That little lady has a sock."

"Son, don't tell me she–she hit you?"

"I'll tell the world she did."

"What in Gawd's name for?"

"Nels, it's too long a story. I deserv-

ed it and I took it."

"Lance, you're uncommon bitter. I don't mind admittin' thet I had it figgered you—you was in love with Majesty."

"Nels, damn your lunatic hide!" burst out Lance. "You don't mind admitting! Say, you lying old matchmaker, you've been driving me nuts! You haven't given me any peace for weeks. You wouldn't even let me sleep. 'Ain't I kinda in love with Majesty? She shore is sweet on you!' What kind of talk! Now, listen, for once, for good and all. 'Kinda in love with Majesty?' Ha! Ha! Ha! I love that good-for-nothing angel so terribly I'm dying for her. Do you get that? I'm stark, staring mad about her. I'd shoot myself if I hung around here any longer. So I'm beating it. Now, take a load of that."

"Son, it'll be the turriblest mistake if you run off now," replied Nels, awed and moved. "Fer Majesty's jest as turrible in love—"

"Skip it. You're balmy. You're nuts. You're crazy," retorted Lance, wrenching the words out. It was insupportable to listen to such raving from this simple old man. "Listen to this. All the cattle Stewart had left were rustled last night, right after dark. Must have been rounded up in the daytime."

"What?" roared Nels, changing magically. "Why'n' hell didn't you tell us?"

"Your darling Madge begged me to keep it till tomorrow. Well, that's today."

"Who told you?"

"Bonita."

"Ahuh. How'd you drag thet oot of her?"

"I threw a couple of those punches into her, danced with her, took her out. Well, she spilled the beans, on conditions."

"What conditions?"

"Never mind them, Nels. I won't tell you. And you're not to give Bonita away to Stewart or Ren."

"Humph! You cain't fool them."

"That's not important. The cattle have been rustled by *vaqueros*. Bound across the border. By the Gray Ridge Divide. Where's that?"

"It's thet long gray hill southeast of heah. Aboot ten miles, closest. Separates the range from the foothills of the Peloncillos. There's a cattle trail straight down the valley across the border. Rustlers used it years ago."

"Stewart's cattle ought to be around that divide by now."

"Shore, an' then some. What's yore idee, son?"

"I'm going to find out."

"Good. But don't let yourself be seen from the ridge top. Those rustlers will figger thet the cattle won't be missed right off. But they've got sharp eyes. With two days' start they'd aboot get acrost before we could haid them off. I'll get Stewart an' Danny, an' Starr drunk or sober, an' hit this cattle trail. Meanwhile you locate the rustlers, then ride on in to town. Don't lose no time gettin' an ootfit of cowboys—or any kind of a posse, an' ride hell-fer-leather to haid these greasers off."

"Okay, Nels. I'm on my way," replied Lance. "Nels, that outfit might get suspicious or something, and hit up the Cochise Trail. Tell Gene and Ren to look for my tracks on that trail, crossing the valley."

Then vaulting astride, he rode across the square, down by the sleeping village, out upon the shadowy gray range. It was almost daybreak when he struck the wash. By the time a ruddy light showed over the dark mountain barrier Lance had struck the fresh cattle

track. It crossed the highway and headed straight for the low slant of gray that marked the northern end of Gray Ridge Divide.

Lance crossed the valley obliquely and headed up the ridge about five miles south of the point. The sun was high in the heavens when he gained the summit. He took care not to show his horse or himself on top of the ridge. There were rocks and scrub cedars all along, affording good cover.

Lance dismounted to reconnoiter. He had to walk a long way north on the ridge before he discovered the cattle. They had been driven into the head of the narrow valley between the foothills and the ridge, and were grazing. The distance was not quite too far to distinguish horses and riders, but Lance had to wait a good while before he made sure he saw them. They should have traveled down the valley to a point almost equal with his position. Lance lingered there until he saw the herd move down the valley toward him. Then he retraced his steps.

Arriving at the spot where he had left his horse, Lance sent a keen gaze back across the valley toward the ranch. He espied puffs of dust some miles out from the highway, about on a line with the cattle trail. He concluded Gene and his riders were in pursuit of the rustlers.

Lance mounted and rode along a rough summit trail, which Umpqua had to walk. Lance calculated that he was 40 miles from the highway, and close to 40 from town. The hour was short of midmorning. He had all the rest of that day, and longer, if need be, to carry out Nels's instructions. Recovery of the cattle looked easy to Lance. He tried to conjecture unforeseen circumstances. If the *vaqueros* discovered they were being pursued they would take to the foothills and escape. Lance eyed those formidable hills, rising and swelling gradually to the rough black summits of the Peloncillos.

"My best bet is to go down to the range and look for a cattle outfit between here and town," Lance told himself, and after thinking of every angle possible he decided to put his idea into effect. There were several ranches along that slope of the ridge, and he might be fortunate enough to meet some riders. To this end Lance headed down the slope.

It was sunset when Lance caught up with a trio of cowboys leading three pack horses and half a dozen extra mounts. Lance joined them with a greeting and pulled Umpqua to a walk.

"Howdy," returned a lean towheaded rider, fastening penetrating eyes upon Lance. "I seen you coming 'way back. Jest about in a hurry, wasn't you?"

"I'll say. You're the Bar X boys from Spencer's ranch, aren't you?"

"Wal, we're some of them."

"I'm Sidway, riding for Gene Stewart."

"I reckoned you was. My handle's Tim Sloan, an' my pards are brothers, sons of Spencer."

Lance lost no time accounting for his presence, and the lean rider was so interested that he reined his horse, and halted the cavalcade in the middle of the road.

"Hell you say! Boys, you hear thet? How far back air these raiders with Stewart's cattle?"

"Over the ridge in the valley, halfway at the least."

"An' when was it you sighted them?"

"This morning around ten. Stewart will be behind them, keeping out of sight. And it's my job to get some rid-

ers to head them off from this end."

"We're with you, Sidway. Boys, like as not this same outfit has been runnin' off our stock."

"Purty shore, I'd say," replied one of the brothers. "But we'd help you out if there wasn't a chance."

"Thanks, fellows. I'm relieved. And now, Sloan, what do you advise?"

"Wal, them stolen cattle won't get nowhere near this end of the valley tonight. My idee is to camp here outside of town, an' be off before daylight in the mawnin'. How's thet suit you?"

"Fine. It's just going to work out great."

Before dusk settled down the riders halted just on the edge of Bolton near a clump of trees Lance remembered having passed on the trip to the Peloncillos.

"Sloan, will we eat in town?" queried Lance, as he dismounted.

"No. Boss won't stand for thet. We'll throw up some grub here. But we're out of coffee an' butter."

"I'll buy some. Do you think I ought to notify the sheriff?"

"Hell no. This deal is a cinch, an' thet old geezer would hawg all the credit."

Lance strode off into town. At Smith's Store on the highway Lance purchased butter and coffee, and several cakes of hard chocolate, one of which he put in his pocket. While the clerk was wrapping Lance's purchases the proprietor accosted him.

"Hey, Sidway, when did you leave the ranch?"

"Before daylight this morning. Rode down the ridge looking for cattle."

"Then you don't know Stewart's phone is out of connection? I suspect it has been cut."

"Indeed I don't."

"Well, something's wrong. This morning Mrs. Stewart phoned in an order. I expected some things she wanted by express, so did not call until after they arrived. Then I couldn't get an answer."

"That's not strange. One of the old telephone poles may have toppled over," replied Lance thoughtfully.

"Yes, it might, but it didn't," returned Smith bluntly.

"Yeah? How do you know?"

"Mike Scanlon was in not ten minutes ago. He'd been out for a load of dead aspen wood. He said that when he was cuttin' it, out there along the creek, he saw a big black car dustin' along toward town hell-bent fer election. An' it stopped down the road eight or ten miles. Mike forgot about thet until he got near to the highway. Then he tangled up in a wire thet turned out to be Stewart's. It had fallen across the road. Hadn't been cut long, for Mike saw the bright end, where it had been clipped. He thought somebody in thet big black car had done it. Not half an hour ago! Damn queer, don't you call it?"

"Where does this Mike Scanlon live?"

"Up at the end of town, on the other side of the highway. Ask Meade, the garage man."

Lance, hurrying along past the bright red and yellow lights, pondered this news. Apparently Stewart's telephone wire had not been cut until late in the day. That seemed to preclude any possibility of the rustlers being accountable. A big black car! Lance wanted to talk to Mike Scanlon about that car.

He passed the last bright neon lights. Meade's garage appeared to be deserted. Just at that moment a big black

car, with headlights dark, moved slowly down the back road. Lance wanted a look at that car. It was strangely familiar in line and build. He swerved off the highway, crossed the open space to the back road.

"Hi there. Hold up," he called boldly. Manifestly the driver heard him, for the car came to a halt. The street lamp behind Lance caught the gleaming faces of men in the front seat.

"Stick 'em up, cowboy!" cut the air with deadly menace. As Lance threw up his hands he recognized that voice.

"Okay, Uhl. Up—they are," he replied quietly.

"Come close."

Lance walked to the automobile, halting abreast of the front seat. Uhl had his hand in his coat pocket and he was leaning over the door. Lance knew that he faced a concealed gun and that he had to think quickly and right. Uhl was bareheaded. His clean-cut visage shone pale and cold in the light. The driver hunched down over the wheel, as if ready to race. The engine purred.

Then Lance caught the gleam of a machine gun on the lap of a man in the back seat. Between him and another man shrank a girl with face as white as chalk and great dark eyes. Lance recognized her with a terrific stop of his heart. For an instant he seemed to reel dizzily, then the cold, sickening freeze of his very marrow quickened to a hot gush of blood, and his faculties cleared to a magnified intensity.

"Cowboy, you've been here on Cork's snatch racket?" queried Uhl sharply.

"Yes."

"What held him up?"

"I don't know."

"We beat him to it! Who wised you and why're you looking for me?"

"Want to tip you off. You cut the wire too late. Sheriff here has blocked you as far west as Tucson and as far east as El Paso. Posse down the road waiting to blow your tires into smithereens."

Uhl burst into vehement curses: "Raggy, damn your dumb soul! I ought to bump you off for that loss of time back there— What'll we do?"

"Shoot our way through," rasped the driver.

Lance interrupted in ringing low voice: "Might be okay for Bolton but points farther on the highway will be blocked. No chance in a million. Just as bad east. The wires are hot."

"Fox, what's the dope?" flashed the leader.

"Are you asking me?" curtly retorted one of the men in the back. "Didn't I warn you against this racket? I advise hiding along the railroad track and hopping a freight."

"You're no fox. You're a rabbit. Cowboy, what's your tip?"

"Beat it for the hills pronto," exclaimed Lance hurriedly. "You can't get through this town by car."

"Hills! I get it. But horses, food, blankets—where can they be found?"

"Cowboy outfit just out of town. You can buy what you need from them and be on the trail in a jiffy."

"Good. Where'll we go?"

"Up in the Peloncillos. Rough wild country. You couldn't be tracked. You can hide for days. As soon as you get your dough you can ride down across the border into Mexico."

"Good tip, cowboy. What about this bus?"

"Send your driver on the ridge road. Give him water and grub. When morning comes he can drive off the road into the cedars beyond the point. And hide there. He could get out later."

"Oke. Will you guide us?"

"Sure. If you slip me enough."

Uhl's gun gave out a metallic clink as he drew his coat over the door. Producing a roll of bills, he handed one to Lance.

"Here's a grand."

"Make it two, Uhl. And promise of more if I get you through," demanded Lance, lowering his hands.

"Okay, you chiseler. Jump on the running-board and tell the driver where to go."

Lance ran around to the other side of the car and caught on. He directed the driver down the road and away from the town. A campfire blazed among the trees. In a reaction of feeling Lance could scarcely hold on. He imagined he was in a dreadful nightmare. But the car was moving. In the back he saw a gangster on this side with a machine gun across his knees, the same as the other. And on the floor lay another man. Lance puzzled over that. If he could steer them up into the hills, Stewart would be on his trail in another day. It was the only chance.

"Here we are," called Lance, as the car approached to within 50 feet of the campfire, out in the shadow.

"Fox, you and Flemm get out and stick up this bunch," ordered Uhl.

It was done almost in the twinkling of an eye. Uhl got out and faced the cowboys. Sloan's comrades, especially the cook, looked comical in their amazement, but Sloan himself grew pale and grim.

"No holdup, cowboys. I want to buy horses and stuff to go up in the hills. Here's a grand."

"What's thet?" queried Sloan.

"Ten hundred smackers—a thousand dollars, you dumbbell."

"What do you want fer thet much?"

"Five saddle horses, some packs, and whatever else we need."

"It's a deal."

Uhl stuck the bill into the cowboy's shirt pocket. "Line them up, Flemm, and keep 'em covered. Come here, cowboy."

Lance strode into the campfire light, quite prepared for the profane ejaculations of Sloan and the Spencer brothers.

"Pick out what we want damn quick."

"Uhl, we'd save time by having these cowboys help me saddle and pack. Two of your men can keep them covered," suggested Lance.

"Oke. Step on it," rejoined Uhl, then repaired to the car. He opened the back door. "Come out, baby."

Madge descended from the car, clad in white slacks and a white sport coat. She made a step toward the campfire, when Uhl seized her roughly.

"Say, you move only when you're told," ordered the gangster harshly. "Honeybee Uhl talking—and you get it."

"All right. But keep your hands off me," flashed Madge with a passion that told her spirit had not been weakened. And she twisted free.

"Oke, baby. But you might as well get used to them. Raggy, throw that college bloke out. Then you grab some eats and drink and beat it."

Lance was as amazed as the other cowboys to see a limp young man pulled out of the car. He appeared dazed or injured, but he sat up, to disclose the handsome pale features of Rollie Stevens.

"Get up and come to the fire," ordered Uhl. And he pushed Madge along ahead of him. "Now sit down, both of

you. In a minute I'll talk ransom money to you. Raggy, don't forget to put our bags out of the car."

Lance tried to see and hear everything from where he saddled Umpqua. The other cowboys were saddling and packing with extreme celerity under the guns of the two gangsters.

Lance, thinking to have Madge ride his horse, shortened the stirrups. If a chance offered he might shoot one or more of these fellows and leap up behind Madge to make their escape. In a very few minutes six saddle and two pack horses were ready to travel. He searched for an extra rope and canteen, to tie them on his saddle. He heard the car roar and roll away up the ridge road.

Hurrying back to the campfire, he said crisply, "Ready, Uhl."

"My God!" cried Rollie Stevens. "It's Sidway. Madge, look!"

"I've had the pleasure," returned Madge with infinite scorn.

"*Kidnaper!*" shouted Stevens incredulously. Then it appeared a kind of joy came over him. That infuriated Lance, whose nerves were taut.

"Fetch those cowboys here," called Uhl.

When Sloan and his two comrades were lined up in front of the gangster, he asked, indicating Sloan, "What's your name?"

"Tim Sloan."

"Get this dope, cowboy," went on the gangster, deliberately. "In the morning you notify Stewart I'm holding his daughter for fifty grand."

"My father can't raise that," interposed Madge. "He is practically ruined. But I can raise half that."

"Baby, will you keep out of this?" retorted Uhl, then turning to Sloan again he resumed. "Notify Stewart I want fifty grand for her, and the same for her boy friend. If my orders are not obeyed, we'll rape the girl, and then kill them both. No bluffing. Send one man on our track with the money. Get that, cowboy?"

"Shore—I get it," replied Sloan huskily.

"Fox, you keep these fellows covered until we're all in the saddle and out of the light. Sidway, you lead the way with the pack horses. I'll follow with the dame. Fox, you and Flemm drive Stevens between you. Let's go."

"Uhl, I've selected an easy-gaited horse for Miss Stewart," spoke up Lance. "It's a tough trail."

"Yeah? Bet she'll stand it better than any of us. I haven't been in a saddle half a dozen times in my life. Which horse? Come on, baby."

Lance led them over to Umpqua, and took from the saddle the fleece-lined coat he had untied.

"Get into this. It'll be bitter cold when we're high up," he said, and held the coat for her. If he had not been under stress of strongly suppressed emotion he might have recoiled from her convulsed white face and magnificent eyes. But her look of horror and hate strangely changed.

"*It can't—be true!*" she cried poignantly.

"What can't be true, baby?" interposed Uhl.

"That Lance Sidway is a side partner of *you*, Bee Uhl!"

"Miss Stewart, it happens that I am," replied Lance. "Hurry into this coat. You'll find gloves in the pocket."

Lance blindly held the coat for her and then plunged away. Mounting Sloan's horse, he drove the two pack animals into the road, and headed for the dark hills. In a moment or more

he recognized Umpqua's gait behind him, and presently heard the other horses following.

He was determined to be alert and ready on the instant to seize any opportunity to escape with Madge. It would come inevitably. These tenderfoot gangsters, unused to horses and pains, climbing into the wild rugged hills, would sooner or later provide that opportunity. But if it did not come before Uhl resorted to violence with the girl, then Lance must be quick to kill him, and call upon her to run for her life while he fought it out with the others.

Several miles out, the road swung to the south, and the Cochise Trail branched off around the lower point of the ridge. The black hills loomed high. A brightening to the east heralded a rising moon. Lance did not need the repeated calls from Uhl to "step on it," and he led across the valley at a trot. The pack horses, with light burdens, did not hold up the progress. In short order Lance reached the point where the trail started up the slope.

He slapped the pack animals up the trail and followed them. Umpqua, with a loose bridle, kept right on the heels of Lance's horse. When Lance turned to look back he saw Madge almost close enough to touch. The other four riders came on in close single file.

Lance zigzagged after the pack horses, and forbore gazing back again. But he thrilled at her nerve. She was not in the least afraid of Uhl. Lance let the pack horses initiate the rests. They were well-trained animals. Beyond the first foothill yawned a shadowy cedar flat, which led to another slope, long and gradual. When he surmounted it to the summit a full moon soared white above the black domes, transforming the dark night into a silvery luminous day.

Presently the trail led into a narrow canyon. It was long and tortuous, heading at last into a mountain meadow, where traveling was comfortable for a while. A black belt of pines loomed ahead, shining in the moonlight. Lance kept eye and ear keen for his followers. Madge appeared to ride easily, but the others were growing crippled. They shifted from side to side in their saddles, let their legs hang, and grumbled intermittently.

The forest belt gave way to rough rocky country where Madge, if she had not bestrode a grand horse, would have suffered considerably. The horses labored slowly over shale and up loose slides and through thick brush that tore at them. The moon reached a point overhead; the air had a bite in it; coyotes mourned lonely cries; the night grew far advanced. Here Uhl at last fell off his saddle and walked behind Madge, leading his horse. The other gangsters cursed and raved for a halt.

"Sidway, for God's sake, have a heart!" yelped Uhl finally. "Aren't we far enough? Can't we camp here?"

"No water. No grass. You must go on," replied Lance.

"But we've rode—a hundred miles—already," panted the gangster.

"Seems like, maybe. But we're not twenty miles from town. Better get on your horse again."

Uhl obeyed, groaning. Lance would not let them rest, and presently divining that Uhl was dependent upon him and knew it, he turned a deaf ear to appeals and curses and threats alike. And he led on and up through increasingly rough country, until Uhl, with a bellow, fell off his horse.

"Sorry, Uhl," said Lance. "You almost made it."

"Made what?"

"Camp at Cochise's stronghold. Not much further. And a swell place. Water, wood, grass. A log cabin."

"Gimme a–drink–Fox," panted the gangster. "I can walk–the rest."

"I wouldn't ride no furder for Al Capone," retorted Flemm doggedly.

"Well, you can rot here–for a little shot," snapped Uhl, and he labored to his feet. "Beat it, cowboy."

Lance led on, riding with his hands in his pockets. On the heights it was cold. Madge would be warm, all except her feet. Stevens appeared to be sagging in his saddle, but Lance could not summon any sympathy for the collegian.

The last miles of that uphill ride were dragging and cruel to the gangsters. Even Stevens, hurt at the outset in some way, endured the ordeal better. When Lance led into the beautiful wooded park which inclosed Cochise's stronghold, the moon was low and dawn not far away. He halted the cavalcade under some spreading pines.

Lance's hands were so stiff from cold that he could scarcely start a fire. But that once done, he gathered firewood and soon had a blaze. White and silent now, Madge leaned against a tree. Lance threw his saddle, then flew to the packs. In a few moments he had them off the horses. He carried one to the fire and threw out blankets. Uhl knelt, his shaking hands to the fire. The other gangsters stood over the blaze, guns in hands, still wary and watchful. Their chief might have trusted Lance, but they did not.

"Majesty–aren't you–frozen?" asked Rollie, his teeth chattering. "Come to the–fire."

"My feet–are ice," she whispered.

"Here," cried Lance sharply. "They can't be frozen. It's not cold enough. Sit here, on this blanket. Lean against the pack. Put this blanket over you. Never mind, I'll take off your shoes."

Her thin shoes and stockings afforded little protection against this frosty air. Her little feet did feel like blocks of ice.

"Rollie, throw a blanket round you and sit close to her," went on Lance. No one seemed to oppose him, and he caught Madge's great dark eyes upon him.

Then Lance leaped to throw the other pack, and unsaddle the horses. He turned them loose. The luxuriant grass and good water in the mountain park were the equal of any pasture. There was not much likelihood of their straying soon, and Umpqua at least would stay. Lance went back to the fire.

Madge was asleep, her fair face drooping upon Rollie's shoulder. He too had sunk into weary slumber. On the other side of the fire Uhl lay covered with his head on a log, dead asleep. Fox appeared to have crawled under a pack canvas. Flemm sat on his guard, his machine gun at rest, his eyes like gimlets.

"Cowboy, stretch yourself right there," he said. "Me an' Fox will have a go at this job."

Lance dragged his saddle close, and wrapping himself in his blanket, he lay down to make up a little for the loss of two nights' sleep. His last thought was a wondering if he dared risk a snap shot at Flemm, and then kill Fox and Uhl as they lay. Sleep claimed him before he could decide.

Daylight had come when he was awakened by a sound of wood being dumped upon the fire. Fox had taken Flemm's place on guard. The others were still locked in slumber. Lance fell

asleep again and when he awakened the sun was high. Uhl sat huddled near the fire, his pale face showing the havoc of extreme exertion and privation. Behind him the fox-featured guard paced to and fro, gun in hand.

Lance threw off his blanket and arose to his feet, cramped with the cold.

"Good morning. Kind of brisk up here on top," he said cheerfully.

"Brisk? Ha! I damn near froze to death," ejaculated Uhl.

Lance spread his hands to the blaze, and casually looked about. The third gangster evidently was hidden under the tarpaulin. The two victims of the kidnapers were asleep. All Lance could see of Madge was her disheveled golden hair.

"Uhl, it's only a little way to the log cabin," said Lance. "Much better place to camp. Hadn't we better move over? Then I'll cook some meat and make some hot coffee."

"Oke, cowboy. Step on it. I'll follow with these duds. Fox, kick Flemm out of his sleep. Baby, wake up and get wise. This is the last time you'll ever sleep with any man but me."

Lance, with murder in his heart, lifted a pack upon his shoulder, and stepping into the trail he strode for the clearing. He could see it through the big pines, a beautiful glade, with its frosted grass glistening under the sun. Sight of deer made him think of his rifle. That was in his saddle sheath. There might come a chance later to use it. Umpqua whistled from some point near at hand. Lance saw no sign of the other horses. A huge pine tree with wide spreading branches, and some high gray rocks marked the site of the log cabin. Its open door stared like a black curious eye, wondering what was to happen there. All around stood up the stately pines and, beyond them, rugged crags.

Depositing the pack under the pine, Lance hurried back for another load. Halfway he met the gangsters. Lance swerved off the trail into the brush. He had a reluctance to meet Madge Stewart face to face. Yet the part he was playing sustained him with a kind of rapture. Perhaps he was afraid she might see through him. Most certainly he must look a queer kind of villain. Returning to the glade with the second pack, which he had opened, he set that down with the other, and then proceeded to build a fire. This done, he went back to fetch his saddle and the blankets that had been left.

Flemm, the meanest-looking of the gangsters, manifestly distrusted Lance, and for that matter, the situation itself. He sat apart, holding the machine gun across his knee.

Lance spread the tarpaulin on the grass and proceeded to empty the contents of a pack.

"Rollie, you're one of these worthless rich guys, I know," said Lance, not without sarcasm. "But if you'd condescend to help me, we'd have breakfast sooner."

"I'd starve to death before I'd associate with you in any way," declared the collegian.

"Yes, and you'd let Madge starve, too. If you and she were left alone on your own, she'd soon get your number."

"Lance, can I offer my services as assistant cook?" Madge asked suddenly.

"Can you mix biscuit dough?"

"Swell. Nels taught me."

"Go to it. Here's flour, salt, lard, pan. Fetch some water. I'll heat the Dutch oven."

Presently breakfast was ready, and it was Madge, not Lance, who called, "Come and get it!" Kneeling over the fire had caused her cheeks to burn red, and it was only in her deep somber eyes that there was any sign of physical or mental distress.

They all sat or knelt to eat and drink, except Flemm, who patrolled his short beat. Fox brought him food and drink.

"Baby, I didn't think it was in you," declared Uhl, devouring one of the hot biscuits.

She did not reply or deign to glance at the gangster, and he took offense at her indifference.

"Get this, baby," he flashed in cold passion. "Soon as I thaw out and get some sleep, I'll change your damned manner." With that he stamped away into the pines, beyond the clearing.

Stevens appeared to shrivel up at the significance of that threat. Madge gazed intently at Lance, her wonderful eyes, hypnotic in effect, searching his very soul. She was delving into his depths. What did she imagine she saw there? She was strangely uncertain of her convictions about him. Her present bad conceptions might be warring with good ones of the past.

Lance nearly betrayed himself before her tremendous appeal. But he was aware that the beady and fox-eyed gangsters were watching, too. Kneeling once more, Lance bent over the utensils, and began collecting them preparatory to washing. Presently Uhl returned.

"Flemm, I'll give you a rest for half an hour. Then I want to sleep. God, that sun feels good!" Then he turned to Madge.

"Baby, you can go into the cabin."

She hurriedly acted upon the order.

"Uhl, hadn't I better look up the horses?" queried Lance.

"Horses? I forgot them."

"They've strayed. I didn't see any tracks going down the trail. So they must be around. You realize how important horses are, don't you?"

"By God, I do now! Here, Stevens, you wash up that mess. Cowboy, find those horses."

Lance, making a show of anxiety and hurry, strode off. Circling the clearing, he found Sloan's roan and near by his own horse Umpqua. No sign of the other animals. Lance did not bother to hunt tracks. He made a detour and came up within sight of the camp, and sat down on a log to peer through the foliage. He could see the cabin. There, watching intently, he brooded over the situation.

Presently he saw Flemm rejoin Uhl. The three gangsters held a colloquy, which was unintelligible to Lance. But they did not appear concerned. Once Fox pointed at Stevens, who knelt with his back turned, laboring over his task. Again Uhl made a passionate gesture toward the cabin, at which Flemm threw up his hands in resignation. Then Uhl lay down on a blanket in the sun and went to sleep.

Lingering there for some time, Lance finally retraced his steps.

"Found only two horses," he informed Flemm. "The rest have wandered off. I'll have to saddle up to find them."

"Wait. If we waked up the boss now he'd bump you off."

"But every hour they may stray farther away."

"Okay by me. I'd a hell of sight rather walk."

Whereupon Lance proceeded to wipe the utensils for Stevens. "Rollie, this is a tough break," he said. "Don't

take it so hard. You'll come out okay, except for loss of some dough you won't miss."

"I don't mind the money. I fear for Majesty. It was all my fault—that we were caught by these ruffians. I persuaded her to come out—lied to get her, in fact. And we were held up."

"Sidway," interrupted Flemm sarcastically, "you don't strike me as a snatch scout. Cheese it!"

Lance wisely refrained from further talk, though he gnashed his teeth. When the chores were finished he cut and packed firewood, mostly bark from dead trees. After that he cut great armloads of spruce boughs and dragged them to camp.

"Sid, there's somethin' rotten about you, but it ain't in this camp stuff," commented Fox.

"Ha! He learned all that in Chi," laughed Flemm.

"Say, tenderfeet, if you're stuck up here for a week, you'll appreciate soft beds," replied Lance.

"Week! What in hell's eatin' you? Two days is my limit," retorted Fox.

Lance strode off, ax in hand, groaning over a thought of what complications would evolve among these violent men in another day. He cut armloads of spruce, and packing that back he approached the door of the cabin, and without a glance at the gangsters, made bold to enter.

To his amazement Madge had been waiting, surely watching for him, for she leaped at him.

"Lance—*darling*," she whispered, and circled his arm with her hands.

He let the load of spruce fall with a sodden swish. Her extraordinary loveliness must have been due to intense spirit and emotion. Her face was like a pearl—her eyes glowing purple.

"Are you crooked or honest?" she added.

"Crooked—as hell!" he gasped.

"I fear it. But still you must save me from *him*—and get the ransom. I'll pay anything. He means to attack me—keep me! For God's sake—for Mother's—for mine—save me from that!"

"I'll try. Keep your nerve. Watch!" he whispered huskily, and turned to stride out. Before facing the gangsters he thought it best to go into the woods and cut more boughs. Recovering his poise, he packed another huge load back to camp. Presently he said to Flemm:

"It's getting late in the afternoon. I ought to be wrangling the horses."

"Yeah. An' what's that?"

"Hunting them."

"Set down an' keep your shirt on. Or you might peel potatoes an' what have you."

"*Uhl!*" yelled Lance suddenly.

The gangster leader roused out of his slumber with surprising quickness, and sat up, blinking.

"These guys won't let me hunt for the horses. I found only two. I ought to ride around these woods and find them."

"Hop to it, cowboy. But don't forget we want supper soon."

Lance ran to get his saddle and bridle and blankets, tingling with the vibration of his nerves. All day he had pondered over the need to saddle Umpqua. Once astride the horse he felt that the critical hour was near at hand. Riding off out of sight, he returned to the point where he could watch the camp. The heat of the day was waning, and sunset burned in the west. Lance saw Uhl, bareheaded and coatless, get up to go toward the cabin. And he went in!

That was a signal for Lance to ride back toward the camp. He had to meet the crisis. Terror and panic gave way to fury, and by the time he had reached the clearing he was steel–cold and tight in mind and body. Boldly he rode to the big pine opposite the cabin, and there halted. Flemm and Fox were watching him curiously. With warning gesture, Lance pointed down the trail toward the opening into the clearing. Both gangsters were impelled to leap up and look.

On the moment Lance heard Madge's ringing voice: "No! Bee Uhl, I'll pay the ransom. But–"

"Baby, you started it. You got to come through. No dame who ever lived can play with me," he replied.

"I *did* play with you," she protested. "But I didn't mean what you mean!"

"No matter now. You'll come across."

Lance leaped off Umpqua and ran over to the excited gangsters.

"Where's Uhl?" he queried.

"He said he was goin' to love his baby," replied Fox. "What's eatin' you?"

"I rode up high back there on the slope. And I saw two horses down where the trail comes up. First I thought they were our horses. But they had riders and were coming this way."

"Riders! You mean men on horseback?"

"I sure do. There may be more than two. Looks damn bad. You better sneak down the trail, keeping out of sight, and make sure."

"What of?"

"Who it is and what they want."

"Fox, you go," ordered Flemm.

"Okay. But what'll I do!"

"Hold them up. An' use your gray matter."

Fox looked to his machine gun, and ran out to the trail, which he entered, and glided along till he reached the green foliage where he soon passed out of sight.

Lance stepped up on the pack beside Flemm.

"There! Look!" he whispered tensely. "That little open place, beyond the yellow pine. See!"

"My eyes must be damn poor. I see nothin' but green," growled Flemm.

"Okay! then see stars," hissed Lance, and swung his heavy gun on the gangster's bare head. Flemm fell soddenly. Lance sped across the space to the side of the cabin, listening, watching the door.

He heard a scuffle, then swift light footfalls, then panting breaths, and "I'm not–afraid of you–Bee Uhl!"

"Swell! I like my dames to be wildcats," replied Uhl with something exultant in his voice, no longer cold. "Make me fight for it, eh?"

"Let go! Oh, you beast!"

"Baby–I'll strip you–right now," panted the gangster.

Lance leaped into the doorway, gun leveled. Uhl had Madge backed against the wall. The gangster's clawing hands held strips of her clothing. The girl, half naked, was warding him off, like a tigress at bay.

"*Madge!* Duck! Get away from him!" shouted Lance.

The gangster froze a second, then sprang into convulsive action, to catch the girl and get her in front of him. But she was as strong as he and far more supple. A short struggle ensued, the end of which came when Uhl made the blunder of striking her down. Then, even as he half turned, his thin face gray, his eyes hot and clear as molten steel, Lance leaped to get in better line.

When his gun boomed the gangster

appeared to be propelled against the wall. It upheld him a moment. A great bloody blotch came as if by magic. Lance thought he had shot away half of Uhl's face. He stuck there an instant, a ghastly spectacle, then slid sideways to the floor.

Madge lay apparently unconscious, a bruise on her white temple and a red welt across her bare shoulder. Lance snatched up a blanket, and lifting her flung it around her and carried her out the door. Flemm lay as Lance had last seen him. Far down the trail Fox appeared running toward camp. Lance took a long shot at him for luck, then sheathing his gun, he stepped to the snorting Umpqua, and kicked the stirrup around.

"Steady, Ump! It's me. Hold, you fool horse!"

With Madge in his left arm Lance mounted and drew her across his saddle. Umpqua needed no urging. As he plunged away a rattle of gunshots blended in a continuous volley, and a rain of bullets whistled and ticked through the trees, and pattered on the cabin. But in a few jumps the horse was behind the cabin, and out of danger. Lance held him to a lope along the wall of foliage, into the woods.

Chapter Eleven

Ren Starr's Way

NO SOONER had Gene Stewart lain down and dropped to sleep, some hours after midnight, than he was assailed by nightmares. It was just as well that he had not gone to bed in his own room, for he kicked around pretty violently. And he was in the thick of violent events when someone not a hobgoblin or demon thoroughly aroused him. Dawn had come. He made out Nels standing over him.

"Wal, Boss, you was loco. Never seen you so oot of your haid."

"Hello, old-timer. Been having crazy dreams. Must have been that punch concoction Madge sprung on us."

"Wait till you see Ren. Pile oot, Gene, an' throw on your ridin' things. We've got work on hand."

"Uhuh. So that was the big idea. What's up?"

"Sidway just left on the trail of your cattle. Rustled last night before the ball opened."

"By jacks! He wanted to tell me last night. But Madge wouldn't let him."

"Might hev spoiled her party. We're to hit Sidway's trail pronto. Danny is wranglin' the hawsses. An' I've throwed some grub together. Come along, Boss. We hev Sidway to thank fer somethin' like old times."

Nels clinked out into the patio where his musical footsteps died away. Gene quickly dressed in his range garb, and slipped a comb and toothbrush into his pocket. His gun belt had ample shells, and his rifle was down at Nels's bunkhouse. Then he went to his wife's room and poking his head in the door he awakened her.

"Sorry, dear. Nels just called me. We're going after a bunch of strayed stock. May not be back for a day or two."

"So this is what young Sidway had to tell you?" she replied quickly.

"Good guess, Mom. Go back to sleep, and don't worry about what that cowboy starts. He's a finisher."

Clear daylight had come when Stewart reached the bunkhouses. Four horses saddled and bridled stood at the

rail. He found his men inside eating. Danny looked grim and dark as he bent over his plate. Starr appeared drunk.

"Boss, throw some hot cakes under yore belt. Ren, you drink thet hot coffee or I'll pour it down you."

"Nels—old manz—I want drink."

"I gave you a bracer."

"Ren, you're drunk," said Gene.

"Whosh drunk? I ain't so. It wash just thet peach juice las' night."

Nels forced the cowboy to drink the coffee, and stuffed some biscuits and cold meat in his pocket.

"Boss, let's get goin'," interposed Danny Mains darkly. "If I don't miss my guess we'll hev hell catchin' Sidway."

They rode down past the village, Stewart and Nels gradually drawing ahead, while Mains came along behind steadying Starr in his saddle.

"Nels, what's the deal?" asked Stewart.

"Wal, some Mexicans sloped off with the rest of yore an' Danny's cattle. Gosh, but Danny is sore! They was slick aboot it, when every last person in the country was heah last night. I've a hunch how Sidway got wise to the deal. He's a clever boy, Gene. But how he found oot ain't nothin' to us. The thieves drove the cattle acrost to the valley behind Gray Divide. An' they expect to work them by easy stages down acrost the border. It'd been a cinch but fer Sidway. Wal, he's goin' to locate them, then ride on into town an' get help. In the mawnin' he'll haid the rustlers off in thet narrow valley. Our part is to ride in behind the ridge an' trail them down, keepin' oot of sight. By this time tomorrow I reckon we'll be smokin' them up."

Once across the highway, the four riders settled down to a steady trot, and in two hours had reached the rocky point of the ridge. They rode around cautiously. The gateway to the valley was wide, and on the ridge side thick with sage and brush.

"Let's hold up heah," suggested Nels, and reined in. "Ren, air you so bleary-eyed yet you cain't see nothin'?"

"Nels, I can see a hawss ten miles an' a steer more'n thet—an' a gurl with a red bonnet twice as fur," declared Starr swaggeringly.

"All right. Climb up the slope heah an' see if you can spot the cattle down the valley."

"My Gawd! Climb in these high-heel boots?"

"Come on, Ren. I'll go, too," offered Stewart. They did not ascend the rough brushy slope more than a hundred feet when Starr made good his brag. Then Gene saw a long black band, moving like a snake, down the valley.

"Eight or ten miles?" asked Gene.

"More'n thet, Boss. Jest moseyin' along."

They retraced their steps and reported to Nels. "Wal," said he, "I reckon we better keep travelin'. We want to be on their heels when Sidway haids them back in the mawnin'."

"Ren, don't I remember there's good water down this valley?" asked Gene.

"Shore you do. Nice rocky creek haids aboot where them cattle air now."

"That'll be far enough for us. We'll camp there. Walk your horses and keep your eyes peeled."

They rode on in single file, somewhat separated. The sun rose hot; a flock of buzzards circled high over the locality where the herd moved, indicating death to a calf or heifer. Coyotes slunk

through the sage, another indication of meat on the move; the black domes of the Peloncillos sank behind the gray foothills.

Sometime late in the afternoon Stewart and his men arrived at the head of the creek and halted to make camp there. It was an ideal spot, with grass and sage, and cottonwood trees, and dead cedars near by on the slope.

"Wal, I'll boil a pot of coffee," drawled Nels, "an' what with our meat an' biscuits we won't fare so bad."

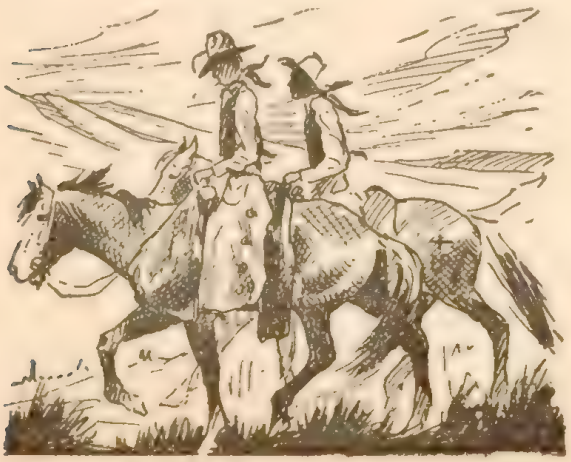
"Rustle then, for I'm almost asleep this minute," replied Gene.

"We ain't none of us had a damn wink of sleep," added Starr.

"Why, Ren, I had to kick you onmerciful this mawnin'," protested Nels.

"Thet wasn't sleep. I was unconscious from Majesty Stewart's punch. Boss, don't you never let thet gurl make thet drink again. My Gawd! if college eddication is responsible fer thet—wal, when I marry Bonita an' we hev a dotter, she ain't goin' to get any modern schoolin' atall."

They talked and had their leisurely and frugal meal round the little smokeless campfire, while the sun set and shadows appeared under the slopes. Stewart made his bed with saddle and blankets, and scarcely had he stretched himself when a subtle glue touched his eyelids. Late in the night he awoke, saw Danny replenishing the fire, fell asleep again, to be roused at dawn by an ungentle boot.



"Come an' get it," said Nels cheerily. "I've a hunch we've a day ahaid of us."

Before broad daylight they were on the move. When the sun arose, Danny and Ren rode up the slope to locate the cattle, but failed to do so, owing to a projecting cape that ran down into the valley. This was some miles ahead. Before they reached it Ren sighted dust clouds.

"On the run already," declared Nels.

"Looks like it," admitted Stewart.

"They're pretty far yet, Boss," added Ren.

"Wal, there ain't no use in our haidin' the cattle off, when we want them to come this way."

"No. But how about the rustlers?"

"If they got haided off below, we won't see hide nor hair of them."

They rounded the cape and rode at a trot fully five miles farther before Ren sighted cattle. They were headed up the valley and evidently had been running, but had now slowed down. They rode on, keeping sharp lookout for riders on the slopes, and presently had to take to higher ground to let a scattered herd pass.

"Aboot seven hundred, I'd say," observed Nels. "Reckon thet's all of them. Not winded much. They'll be home tomorrow."

"Wonder where'n hell them rustlers rode?" complained Ren. "I ain't feelin' swell, an' I'd shore like to shoot at somebody."

"Suits me," replied Danny, relieved. "Killin' Mexicans even from acrost the border wouldn't set good with my family."

"Danny, we don't know them rustlers was greasers," declared Ren, too casually.

"No. But I was afeared they might be."

Stewart suggested they ride on to meet Sidway and whomever he had with him. Very soon Ren sighted three riders, whereupon Stewart ordered a halt.

"Lance ain't in thet ootfit," declared Starr presently. "Say, they see us, an' air ridin' to beat the band."

Stewart was curious about the three horsemen who were evidently in a hurry to reach them. In very short order they arrived, three lean cowboys, ragged and dusty and hard-eyed. Stewart recognized them.

"Howdy, boys. Where's Sidway?"

Stewart thought Sloan's intent eyes searched his with undue fire, and he wondered what was coming.

"Mawnin', all," returned Sloan. "Stewart, you don't 'pear all het up aboot this raid—or nothin'."

"I'm well satisfied, thanks to you boys. Did you get a line on the rustlers?"

"They seen us far off an' bolted. We couldn't make them out."

"All right, that's that. Where's Sidway?" rejoined Stewart sharply, suddenly sensing some untoward circumstance.

"By now Sidway must be at Cochise's stronghold, guidin' some gangsters who'd kidnaped your girl Madge an' a young fellow."

A blank silence ensued. But amazement did not long obstruct Stewart's faculties. He had sensed catastrophe. Sloan's tan had lost a shade. His eyes smoldered.

Nels flung a clenched hand at him. "Sloan, what you sayin'?"

"Listen, all of you. But don't waste no time restin' here. Come on. Ride close an' let me spill it."

By the time Sloan had concluded, Stewart's horror had mounted to a ruthless and terrible wrath. Starr's face had grown a leaden white, and he appeared incapable of speech. After a brief paroxysm of emotion Nels interrupted Danny Mains's curses with a terse query: "Gene, what do you make of Sidway?"

"What do you?" countered Stewart huskily.

"I got it figgered. When he went in town he seen thet car with Madge in it. He must hev been slick enough to scare them kidnapers off the highway, to take to the hills."

"Boss, thet's it—one of Nels's hunches," affirmed Starr. "But, my Gawd, we got to rustle!"

"Sloan, you boys will go with us," asserted Stewart.

"You bet your life!"

"Nels, we'll cut off the trail halfway up, and work round to the west side of Cochise's stronghold. We might get there ahead of them. It'll be a drill for tenderfeet. They'll be all in. We've got time. We *must* make it before dark. Now, all of you—ride!"

Riders and horses were wet with sweat, and practically spent when that long climb up the mountain had been accomplished by sundown. A halt was made in the deep forest west of Cochise's stronghold, at a point they all agreed was scarcely a half mile from the clearing.

"Ketch your—breath, fellers," panted Nels, as he removed his chaps.

"Men, in case they're here—" began Stewart.

"They air heah," interrupted Nels.

"Didn't we foller their tracks over two-thirds of thet trail? Didn't Sloan ketch two of his hawsses makin' fer home? Sidway would make the gang stop heah, even if it wasn't the logical camp."

"All–right, then," Stewart rasped. "We'll slip up on them. Then what?"

"Stewart, they're gangsters with machine guns. I'd say shoot 'em down on sight."

"Hell, yes," agreed Starr.

"Wal, I don't know," added Nels ponderingly. "Shore we never–dealt with any of this ilk–before. I'd say hold 'em up. If they don't hold up pronto then bore 'em."

"By all means before they can turn machine guns loose in our direction," replied Stewart grimly. "But I want to talk to these *hombres* first–and then see them kick at the end of a rope."

"Boss, it's a better idee at thet," agreed Ren savagely. "But my gun finger is shore itchin'. If we only find–Madge alive an' unharmed."

"We will–shore," declared Nels passionately. "I may hev lived to be old an' soft, but somehow I gamble on Sidway. He loves thet girl an' he'll ootwit the slickest kidnapers there ever was."

"Nels, that faith has kept me from collapse. First time in my life I've weakened. But it's–my girl!" exclaimed Stewart.

A pine-thicketed slope led up to the gray crags. They entered the mountain enclosure through a gateway between the huge monuments of stone. The clearing lay beneath Stewart's strained eyes, a green and gold park marked by great pines scattered about, and shining with appalling beauty under the sunset glow. A thin column of blue smoke halfway across made Stewart's heart leap. Ren pointed to a roan horse grazing in the open meadow, and Sloan whispered that it was his horse Baldy.

At a motion from Nels they stealthily began their approach down to the level. Every few rods Nels halted to listen. Stewart could hear only the sough of the wind in the pines, and the murmur of distant running water. The place seemed locked in an unearthly silence.

Suddenly Ren startled Stewart and all of them. He held up a warning hand.

"I heah voices," he whispered.

He must have possessed extraordinarily sharp ears, for all of his companions shook their heads. Hardly had they started forward again when the boom of a gun made them statues.

"No forty-five Colt," said Stewart.

"Sidway packs a forty-four Smith an' Wesson. Sounded like it," replied Nels. "Come on, we gotta see this."

Before they had taken a dozen steps a rattling biting volley halted them.

"*Machine gun!*" whispered Sloan in great excitement.

The continuous volley appeared to come from their right down the trail. Accompanying the rattling was a swishing cut of bullets through foliage and then a pattering on solid wood. It ceased. And Ren leaped up in the air, trying to see over the green bush.

"Heah 'em? Hawss hoofs!"

"Shore as Gawd made little apples!"

Stewart was quick to catch a soft rapid thud of hoofs, a crash of brush, a cracking of dead twigs, then thudding hoofbeats dying away.

Nels, his gray eyes like points of flame, motioned them on. Despite the intense suspense, he had the cool judgment to advance very slowly, without the slightest sound. Stewart swallowed his harrowing fears and doubts. Then swift footfalls close in front made him,

and all of them, aware of the nearness of the trail.

Nels crouched down and stealthily separated the small pines to slip through. Starr followed suit, as did the others to left and right. Stewart saw the roof of the old cabin over the tips of the brush.

"Flemm!" shouted a hoarse voice. "What happened?"

"He crowned me," replied another man hotly.

"Who? Not Stevens?"

"No. It was that two-timin' cowboy. He lied about seeing horses down the trail. Ruse to get rid of you. Then he beaned me."

"That shot in the cabin?"

"I didn't hear any."

"You know Uhl went in the cabin to the girl?"

"Yes. I saw that."

"Well, there was a shot in there, all right. Sidway went in and bumped Bee off. That's it. For I saw the cowboy come out with the girl in his arms and jump on his horse. I let loose my gun, but I was running—and didn't connect."

The faces of Nels and Ren appeared to shine upon Stewart, a singular transformation from grim dark passion to an ecstasy of gladness. Stewart felt the same so powerfully that he was overcome. But his tremendous relief was counteracted by a hateful query—had Sidway gotten in that cabin in time? Again Stewart's passion to rend and slay dominated him. He crawled softly after the others, until he bumped into them.

They had arrived at the edge of the clearing. Ren's hard hand pressed Stewart's shoulder. Peering through the foliage he saw that they were scarcely 50 yards from the campfire. Two bareheaded young men, with livid faces, stood facing each other. Both held machine guns. The taller, a dark-haired individual, was bending his head to the other, no doubt for examination. Beyond them on the ground sat young Stevens, apparently uninjured, but plainly shocked with terror.

Then on the moment the gangsters whirled at a piercing shout from the cabin. A third man appeared, a slim-built fellow, with a bloody face. He staggered toward them, a ghastly spectacle, but instinct with life and desperation. His curses rang through the forest clearing. Then he confronted the astounded gangsters.

"That goddam fake cowboy shot me—got away with her!" he yelled wildly. "I'll kill you both—you lousy hop-heads! What in hell were you doing?"

"He fooled us, Bee," replied Flemm. "Made us believe he saw horses. Sent Fox down the trail. Then he crowned me."

"I wish to God he'd smashed your empty pan!"

"Looks like he emptied yours. Better let us wash you off. Looks like what you used for brains is oozing away."

"It's only blood. He grooved me—here—Christ, how it burns! Wipe me off."

Fox laid down his gun and picked up a towel from the pack. He dipped it in a water bucket, and wiped off the blood to disclose to the watchers the visage of a hard-faced criminal.

"*Hands up!*" thundered Nels.

"*Stick 'em up, gangsters!*" rang out Starr's voice.

Uhl and Fox lost not a second in elevating their hands. But Flemm whirled with his machine gun bursting into flame and rattle. Almost instantly his distorted visage went blank and he

pitched forward. The machine gun sputtered into the ground, scattering gravel, then fell from the gangster's stretching hands. Stewart saw smoke issuing from Starr's rifle. Then Nels, gun low, ran out, to be followed by the cowboys. Mains came out from the right. When Stewart emerged from the foliage Sloan was disarming the gangsters.

"Heah, gimme thet rope, Spencer," yelped Starr. Receiving it he spread the noose, and pitched it deftly over Uhl's head.

The gangster had courage or else he did not get the significance of Starr's move.

"Wait, Ren!" ordered Stewart, and strode over to Stevens. "Are you all right, boy?"

"Yes—sir, I—guess so," faltered Stevens. "Thank God. I was about—dead of fright."

"Sidway made off with Madge?"

"He did, sir, but—but—"

"Was she—all right—too?" queried Stewart hoarsely.

"I'm afraid—not. I heard her fighting —*him!*" And Stevens pointed a shaking finger at Uhl. "She'd fainted—or was dead—when Sidway got on his horse with her. But, Mr. Stewart—even if she was alive—she's as bad off with him—for he's one of—these gangsters!"

"Yeah, that's correct," interposed Uhl darkly. "Sidway belongs to Cork's snatch gang. He tricked me. He wants the ransom and the girl for himself. I'll get him for that if it costs me a hundred grand."

"Haw! Haw!" burst out Sloan sardonically.

Ren Starr confronted Rollie Stevens. "Say, did I heah you make a crack about Sidway bein' one of this outfit?"

"Yes, you did. He's hand in glove with these kidnapers. And he has betrayed them. He's—"

"Shet up, you white-mugged college dude! What'd you go to college fer? Haven't you any sense? My pard *saved* the girl."

"You're a thick-headed fool."

"I reckon I'll have to bat you one—"

"Hold on, Ren," interrupted Stewart sternly. "Make allowance for circumstances. It does look strange. But we'll clear it up presently."

The gangster Flemm was dead, shot through the center of the forehead. Stewart ordered Sloan to take charge of the machine guns and Starr to search the gangsters. Nels stood with his gun on Uhl, and not for many years had Stewart seen such an expression on that lean face. Then Stewart strode to the cabin and went in. There was a pile of spruce brush on the floor, but it had not been disturbed.

Searching around, Stewart saw tracks of Madge's little feet in the dust, and he could read from them that she had run and fought. He also found a splotch of blood in a depression, where no doubt Uhl had fallen, and had lain until he came to. There was little more to be learned in the cabin. The dreadful pang in Stewart's breast did not subside. But how grateful he was that Madge was alive and in the keeping of a man!

Upon Stewart's return to the group, Ren pointed to several automatic pistols evidently salvaged from the gangster's effects.

"You boys can have those. Save Uhl's for Sidway. I imagine he'd like to keep it."

"How about these, Boss?" asked Ren, and handed Stewart several wads of greenbacks. On one, the outside wrapper had a denomination of 1,000.

"Peep into thet, Boss. All the same. What these guys call grands."

"Well! These gentlemen seem to deal in large numbers," said Gene sarcastically.

"Stewart, that dough is yours if you pass up this snatch," said Uhl suavely. He seemed to lack comprehension and fear. And his assurance, even before the grim and silent Nels, was remarkable, and could have come only from supreme egoism and ignorance. Stewart knew that no power on earth or in heaven could stay Nels's hand. These vultures had dared to frighten, and probably harm, Nels's one treasure.

"Let me talk to this *hombre*, Ren. You boys tie up the other one," he said, as he stepped close to the gangster. Nels had never swerved his gun an inch from its first deadly alignment. "Uhl, you implicate Sidway in this kidnaping of my daughter. How come?"

"He was going to kidnap Madge himself," snapped Uhl.

"Your mistake. Why would he want to kidnap her when he's going to marry her?"

That random shot of Stewart's broke down the gangster's stubborn convictions and betrayed the terrible nature of the man.

"Marry her—yeah?" he choked out, his face purple, his neck convulsed, his eyes not those of a human. "He's welcome—to the rag—I made her!"

Stewart knocked him flat, but had the self-possession to turn aside Nels's quivering gun. It seemed impossible, however, to control Starr, and suddenly Stewart had no desire to. Starr dragged the gangster to his feet.

"You bastard," he hissed, his visage gray and set. "You'll never live—to brag of thet again!"

"Stand aside, Ren," ordered Nels piercingly.

"No, Nels, you ain't gonna bore him," shouted Starr hoarsely. "An' we ain't gonna hang him. We'll hang his pard, an' make him look on, but by Gawd! I owe somethin' to myself heah!"

Starr slipped the noose over Fox's head and jerking it tight he threw the end of the lasso over a sturdy pine branch, and caught it coming down.

"Heah, Sloan, an' you Spencers! Get in on this. An', young feller, grab hold of this rope behind me, an' pull, if you're half a man. If you don't I'll beat hell oot of you— *pull!* Ahah! Them yells choked off! Yellow clear through! There, tie the end, Sloan."

Stewart averted his eyes, but he could not escape the grotesque jumping-jack shadow on the ground, or the expulsion of breath from the condemned and executioners, the scrape of boots and jangle of spurs, and lastly the incredible spectacle of Stevens hauling on the lasso. For the moment the collegian had answered to primal instincts, and his face was as beastly as those of his fellows.

But suddenly Stewart swerved his attention to Uhl. The gangster had watched the hanging of his lieutenant, and his face, his look, his mien were vastly transformed from what they had been.

"What do you think of our necktie party, gangster?" demanded Ren, leering at him. "Thet's how we do things in the West. I'm jest damn sorry I cain't hang you an' watch you kick. But yore swagger gets my goat. So Mister Bee Uhl, kidnapin', bootleggin' gangster gunman, you're gonna go up agin' my game!"

"Heah, Ren—none of thet. Hang him," said Nels, speaking for the first

time.

"Umpumm, old pard. I wonder you ask it. Where's thet popgun of his?" Ren snatched it from the pack and held it gingerly in contempt. "What do you think of thet toy, Nels? These guys in the movies shoot through their coat pockets. Okay! Where's his coat?" Starr took that up and slipped the little automatic into the right coat pocket.

"Listen to reason, cowboy," importuned Stewart. "I savvy you. But even a little risk—"

"Risk, hell! There won't be none. Anyway, Boss, neither you nor Nels must hev this crook's blood on yore hands."

"What's the difference whether it's you or me or all of us?"

"On account of Madge. An' if you elected to take him to jail—why, Sidway would ride down there an' shoot him in his cell. Thet wouldn't do either, Boss."

Nels appeared to be struck mute and Stewart had no ready answer. Starr drew his gun, and kept it in his hand while he helped the gangster into his coat.

"There! Stewart, you fellers get back pronto— Now Uhl, don't move a hand." Starr backed away from him for perhaps 20 feet. "Turn around, Uhl."

The gangster did as he was bidden, exposing a front that was sickening to men who held courage and nerve as Stewart held them. Blood had again begun to stream down the side of Uhl's temple and cheek.

"Ten—grand—if you'll—"

"Bah!" interrupted Starr piercingly. "You're talkin' to an American cowboy." Starr sheathed his gun and held his hand out, his fingers clutching at the air.

"Nels, you give the word. Come on, kidnaper! Let's hev yore game."

"Ready!" rang out Nels. "*Shoot!*"

Stewart's gaze was riveted on the gangster. In a flash he jerked his right hand down into his coat pocket. As the corner of his coat suddenly pointed out to bark and smoke, Starr's gun crashed and in a second again. The gangster's bullet spattered up dust and gravel. He fell, dead before he hit the ground.

Chapter Twelve

A Western Girl at Heart

UHL'S striking Madge down had less to do with her collapse than the appearance of Sidway in the cabin, with his darkly stern visage, his deadly voice, and the bursting red boom of his gun.

She did not wholly lose consciousness, for she felt him lift her and wrap her in a blanket and carry her out. More clearly then she heard a string of shots and the spang and thud of bullets all about, and felt herself swung upon a horse, and the violent jars of her body as he plunged away.

A vague, almost blank interval succeeded. When her mind cleared again she was being carried comfortably upon a pacing horse over a level trail. Through the big black pines she saw the stars shining, and then a dim outline of Sidway's face and bare head. That thrilling reality brought back vividly the fight with the gangster, his half stripping her, and the brutal blow he had dealt her, and then Sidway's startling and fatal intervention. Sidway, no matter why, had saved her again, and this time from a horrible

fate. Her thoughts grew so wildly whirling that she had to disrupt them by talking.

"Lance! We got away." She felt a strong vibration pass through him.

"Hello! You've come to?" he returned hastily.

"Yes. But I wasn't altogether out."

"I haven't had time to see. Did he hurt you?"

"Lance, I was holding my own with him—when he struck me. I wasn't afraid of him—till then. I suppose he could have beaten me helpless?"

"Then—Uhl didn't—harm you?" queried Sidway in a halting, husky voice.

"No, not outside the blow. Lance! You—*killed* him?"

"Yes."

They rode along the trail in silence. But she watched him from between narrowed eyelids. If she had not been spent and in pain she would have found this situation vastly intriguing. At length Umpqua exchanged his pacing gait for a walk. Evidently the mountain clearing had been passed. Presently Sidway turned off the trail to the left, and had to pick his course.

The forest gradually grew less dense, and therefore lighter. Thickets of pine and spruce reached above Sidway's head, and in places had to be carefully threaded. It became evident to Madge that they were traveling downhill. At length the cowboy halted as if undecided how to proceed.

"Lost?" inquired Madge.

"I'll tell the world," he replied with a queer laugh.

"I'd just as soon you made a halt till morning. I'm about done for."

He zigzagged down the slope for a while, and eventually stopped, to slide out of the saddle. Madge could not help feeling that he handled her as if she were a child. He set her down, back against a tree, which Madge observed to be a cedar. There were still big pines about, but scattering, and the presence of cedars denoted lower altitude.

"I'm freezing to death," she said.

He stripped the horse and haltered him to a sapling. Then from his saddle he untied a blanket, and other trappings. This he doubled and wrapped around her. Then he tore sheathes of bark off the cedar, and snapped twigs and dead branches, with which he started a fire not far from her feet. The crackling of wood and leaping of red flame changed the moon-blanched gloom. While Madge stretched her hands to the heat, Sidway opened a saddlebag.

"Here's some meat, biscuits, dried apples, and a piece of chocolate—yes, and a little salt. Are you hungry?"

"I could go for a *filet mignon* in a big way."

"Dare say you could. Sorry I can't furnish one."

"Very well. I'll have a biscuit and a piece of meat— Thanks. Where are we, Lance?"

"Up in the Peloncillos."

"How far from that camp?"

"Miles, I'd say."

"I wish you could have gotten Rollie away from them."

"Well, I expect trouble enough, without your boy friend."

"Trouble? You'll not have any with me," she returned, all at once cognizant again of the double role he played. "Lance, you're after that ransom yourself!"

In the light of the fire she saw a dark tide sweep across his face. His somber eyes regarded her as if somehow she had recalled to him her true character. He let out a mirthless laugh.

"You guessed it, Majesty," he replied grimly.

"I will gladly pay you. What will those gangsters do with Rollie? His people are rich. They will pay. But it'll take time. Meanwhile Dad and Nels will be on the rampage. That demand of Uhl's will drive him crazy. He can't pay it. I'll bet they are on our trail now."

Sidway had averted his face and he made no reply, facts that excited Madge's speculation. Suddenly a wild conviction bore crushingly upon her.

"*Lance!* Ransom or no ransom—you mean to—to keep me?"

"You sure are some guesser," he declared bitterly.

"My—God! You can't—be so low."

"I declare," he interrupted, as she choked over her words, "you grow better all the time. Wise girl! College girl, you know!"

"Oh, damn!—Lance Sidway, you'll have to marry me!"

She might have struck him, judging by his shrinking start.

"I'll refuse to pay that ransom or move out of my tracks unless you swear you'll marry me."

"Very well, if you think that important," he returned, in a queer voice.

He broke an armful of cedar brush, laid it flat, and put a saddle blanket on that. Then he arranged his saddle for her head. As she moved over, half crawling, the folded blanket fell, and the one wrapped around her half slipped off. Madge made no great haste to wrap it around her again.

"What's the odds?" she said moodily. "You've seen me almost naked before." And she lay down to stretch out wearily, her eyes upon him, as he bent to cover her with the extra blanket. She made the discovery then that if the moonlight did not deceive her, his face was white.

"Now it's settled, let's talk—"

"What's settled?" he interposed.

"Why, I suppose you'd vulgarly call it my hash. I intend to make up for the ruin I unwittingly brought upon Dad and Mom. I suppose you'll block that."

"Too late! I'll need the money."

"But you needn't be a hog. You seemed to like them. Can't you be sport enough to let me make amends?"

"Sure, I liked Gene. And your mother is—swell! But they won't need the money after you've gone."

"Mr. Sidway, when you were snooping over my securities and bankbooks, did you get a line on what I was worth?"

"I did, you bet. It used to be about a million!"

"Yes. But that won't do you much good now. I can sell my pearls and other jewels for a hundred grand—as your gangster pards call it. I'll do that on one condition only. You let me split with Dad and Mom!"

"Okay! Fifty grand will do for our honeymoon—at least until the cops get me."

"Oh, you were wanted by the police even before this," cried Madge despairingly. Then she grew enraged and flung at him: "How can you be so—so fine—so— Oh, so many things, and still be such a beast."

"Mystery of life, baby," he retorted. "How can you be so sweet—have such an angel face—such soulful, eloquent, lovely eyes—such a winning way with everyone, when at heart you are just no damn good?"

"We're certainly two of a kind," she retorted. "But let's not be fourflushers. If you're not big enough to reform

yourself, and me, then be big enough to be outright bad. And not a two-faced liar such as you are!"

That stinging speech appeared to wither him. Presently he began to gather firewood and pile it conveniently. Madge had an intense curiosity in regard to him, and tried hard to keep awake. But she was utterly exhausted, and felt her eyelids falling again and again until they shut for good. She seemed scarcely to have slept any time at all when she was awakened. Sidway was shaking her, and not gently.

"Oh!" The gray dawn, the piercing cold, the ghostly pines quickly regulated her bewildered senses to actuality. "*Buenos dias*, darling."

"Get up. Move around. Eat something," he ordered peremptorily.

Madge found the first desperately hard to accomplish, and the second no easy matter, and the third impossible. Her hands were numb and her feet blocks of ice, until she almost burned them in the fire. Sidway went off somewhere into the woods, presumably to hunt his horse. Madge could easily have escaped from him then. But that would have been absurd, even if she had wanted to. She walked away from the fire and back again, and presently found that exercise relieved both cold and cramp. At length the cowboy returned with his horse, which he saddled and bridled.

"You'll have to ride," he said brusquely.

"Thanks. You're very kind to your squaw—darling."

"But not in that blanket. Here, put on my coat."

"No. You'll need that yourself. I can ride with this blanket around me. Only my hands and feet are cold now."

"Warm them pronto, while I tie these things on."

When presently Madge mounted into the saddle she found the stirrups had been shortened to fit her. Without a word Sidway took hold of the reins and led Umpqua down the slope. He took long strides and a slanting zigzag course, down through the cedars. Broad daylight had come and gradually the nipping air and the frost lessened. Madge kept her hands in the folds of the blanket and endured the acute pain of cold feet.

"Lance, I'm spitting cotton," said Madge, at last breaking silence. "Must have—a drink."

"So am I. But hang on. I see green willows below. There's water."

When at last Sidway found water it was none too soon for Madge. There was nothing to drink out of and Madge said if she got off the horse she could not climb back. Whereupon the cowboy, regardless of the fact that she had let the hot blanket slip down, lifted her out of the saddle, and after she had slaked her thirst, he put her back. Madge had never known before the sweetness and life in cold pure water. There were many things she had never appreciated.

Sidway led on tirelessly, always down, but it appeared to Madge that the slopes were less precipitous and the zigzags far longer. She grew so weary that she sagged and swayed in the saddle, and so hot she wanted to fall off and perish, and so miserable that she had hardly strength left to hold the remnants of her garment around her. Nevertheless she would have endured more before entreating him to find some shade and let her rest. She hated him now. She could have killed him. To make her love him hope-

lessly and terribly, to heap the shame of her horrible selfishness upon her head were indeed enough, without adding this endless insupportable ghastly ride. Madge clutched the pommel and her blanket with sore and hot hands, and sat with closed and burning eyes, wearing to collapse. Minutes or hours dragged by until she seemed not to feel any more. Still she was aware when the horse stopped.

"Look, Madge!" rang out Sidway's voice.

Madge seemed impelled by more than his command. Opening her eyes, she saw that they had halted upon a promontory, a level summit of the last foothill. A blue and gray range land not far below, clear and close in the sunlight, appeared to leap up at her. Across its sage-spotted floor moved a long line of cattle, wearily wending their way. Like a black ribbon some miles out stretched a road with speeding automobiles, flashing sunlight from their glass windows. And beyond, over the blue sage loomed a green-timbered knoll, from the top of which, half concealed, peeped a white ranch house that Madge knew.

"The cattle herd you see working back belong to your father and Danny Mains," said Sidway imperturbably.

"That's the highway! There's—my home!" faltered Madge, fighting a sudden dizziness.

"Thought you'd recognize it," he drawled, lighting a cigarette. "I'm sure tickled with the way I came straight down, in a swell short cut, from Cochise's stronghold."

"*Lance!*" She could not hear her own voice.

"Okay. What now?" But he never turned to look at her.

"You're taking—me *home?*"

"Yes, Miss Stewart. I hate to disillusion you—spoil your pipe dream. It's just too bad, for you're such a swell romancer. You concoct such lovely things about me and my motives. But they didn't pan out, as you see."

"Oh, my—God! Then you didn't kill Uhl—to—to abduct me, but—but to save me?"

"Right. Your comprehension is at least encouraging. You may be a bright girl yet."

"You don't want—a ransom?"

"Madge Stewart, I'd starve to death before I'd accept a dollar of your money."

"Oh—oh—I—What you have done—for me, for Dad and Mom! And I?—Oh, how little—how miserable—you've made me! Oh, the shame!"

Uttering a sharp cry she swayed in the saddle.

"*Madge!* Hang on!" she heard dimly through her fading senses, and then, as she fell into his arms, all went black.

When Madge recovered consciousness she found that Sidway was carrying her in front of him, and traveling at a fast pace across the range. Only vague thoughts accompanied her sensations of faintness and pain, and these faded. Then she went through stages of sleep or semi-consciousness, until at last she recovered sufficiently to make out that it was sunset and that she was almost paralyzed.

"Lance—how far?" she whispered.

"Almost home," he replied cheerily. "I'm glad you came to. Brace up now. So you won't scare hell out of your mother and the girls. Here, I'll have to wrap you up again, for you're sure in a state of nature."

"Oh—you cowboy!" And she turned in his arm, to sink against his shoulder, reviving anew to life and pain and

love, and realizing that there would be nothing worth living for without him. Wide-eyed, she lay there, her cheek against his hot dusty vest. They began to climb and entered the pines.

A little later Sidway halted the horse in front of the house and yelled, "Hello, inside! It's Sidway! And here's Madge, all in, but okay!"

Madge was put promptly to bed, and late that afternoon Stewart and the others returned. The cattle were being driven back by Sloan and his friends. The story of Ren Starr's killing of Uhl was heard in spine-tingling silence by Madge and her friends, and a penitent Rollie was the center of awed admiration for his share in the hanging of the other kidnaper.

Madge made the following day a quiet and recuperative and thoughtful one. Her guests were due to leave next day and she felt that she would be both sorry and relieved to see them go. The truck loaded with baggage departed early the following morning. And at one o'clock three cars took aboard a hysterical bevy of girls and a wisecracking complement of boys. Farewells were prolonged. And at last, when it seemed all had been said, Bu Allen hailed the somber Sidway in a high-pitched penetrating voice.

"Lance, old darling, if Snake Elwell gives me the gate, I'm coming back to go for you in a big way."

That sally elicited a roar of mirth, in which Lance had to join. Madge's rather weak response was a little insincere.

"Old red-top, that will be swell," retorted Sidway.

"Cowboy, you don't think anyone else around here has a look-in with you?" went on Beulah, demurely anxious, with a sly glance at Madge, standing big-eyed and disconsolate on the porch.

"Not a chance, Bu."

Then with a chorus of "We'll be seeing you!" they were off. Madge watched the cars wind into the green pines and disappear down the slope.

"That's over," she said, with a sigh.

Sidway, with Nels and Ren, had slipped away unobserved. There were tears in her mother's eyes. Her father bent an abstracted gaze below, watching to see the cars come out from under the slope.

"Darlings, let's get it over," said Madge, and locking arms with her parents, she led them in.

"Get what over?" queried Stewart, with a start, and her mother looked suddenly concerned.

"Now, Dad! Don't try to fool your little Madge." Forthrightly, then, she plunged abruptly into a confession of how it had come about that Sidway had told her of the impending ruin, if she did not retrieve the situation. She tried to spare the cowboy, but not herself.

"You slapped that cowboy, Madge?" queried Stewart in surprise and concern.

"I'll say I did. You may have observed his cut and swollen lip."

"Yes—what did Sidway say to that?" asked her father curiously.

"He slapped me back."

"No!"

"I thought he'd jar my teeth out of their sockets. But I hit him back with all my might. Then he said he refused to let me make a cat-and-dog fight out of it. Well, that, of course, happened before he told me where to get off.

"Dad, dear—Mom darling, this pass that my extravagance and stupidity—

and selfishness—have brought you to, has almost broken my heart. I shall make amends. I'll pay it all back. I've wired L. A. and New York, too. I can raise a hundred grand on my jewels. I don't need them. I seldom wore Aunt Helen's pearls. I shan't miss them. Dad, will that money save us, with plenty to spare?"

"It would—lass," he replied a little huskily, and his arm tightened round her.

"Madge, dearest," spoke up her mother, her poise for once broken. "I *knew* you would do just this. If Gene had let me tell you long ago!"

"Dad was trying me out, Mom. It's settled, then. I've had a ghastly lesson. I'll make up for it, my darlings. Dad, I never could hope to be your ideal western girl, nor ever in Mom's class as a lady of quality, but I can be a square-shooter and I will be."

"Lass, we might argue over that western-girl idea," returned Stewart, his dark eyes alight.

Her mother folded her in loving arms, and by these simple things Madge seemed to grasp a great joy that had almost eluded her.

"Oh, yes, Dad—there's one other thing," said Madge, turning in her mother's arms. She essayed to be composed and casual, with dubious success. "Can I rely on you—on your keeping Sidway here? He—I— At least I can thank him—reward him somehow."

"Madge, I don't think that'll be at all difficult," replied Stewart, but he did not make clear whether he meant keeping Sidway there or rewarding him.

"I'm almost—happy again," said Madge, yielding to tears, "but still feel kind of wobbly and I'd better—lie down."

"It might be a good idea to talk that matter over with Nels," added Stewart smilingly. "He and Sid are thick as hops."

Madge fled, yearning to ask just what matter her father meant, but she did not dare. How perilously close was she to betrayal of her secret! Her father's evasive eye and significant words, her mother's softened face and restrained sympathy—these were hard to resist. But Madge had a little pride and spirit left. In her room, which had again taken on its old tranquillity and speaking silence, she salvaged something of her old self.

Next morning, biding her time, until she had seen Lance and Ren ride away, Madge waylaid Nels in his bunkhouse.

"Wal, Majesty! I shore was wonderin' when you'd remember yore old Nels."

"Darling, I've never forgotten you," she said tenderly. "It's just that I've been knocked out—and lots on my mind. And I knew when I *did* see you I'd have to talk turkey."

"Aboot who, lass? Well, I reckon I know. An' it's aboot high time."

"Nels! He's not leaving?" queried Madge hurriedly.

"Wal, he talks aboot it a lot. An' he's purty sad these days. Ren rags him all the time aboot you. Lance says he'll stay till Ren an' Bonita air married."

"Oh, Nels! Is that settled?"

"It shore is. An' Ren is one dotty cowboy."

"I'm happy over it. Oh, what shall I give them? It must be something wonderful."

"Wal, lass, if I had my say, I'd want to see another marryin' pretty pronto."

"Nels!—You're so sudden. Have a heart! You mean—"

"Lass, I'm confessin' somethin'," replied Nels earnestly. "I'm gettin' along

–close to seventy. An' I've had a long, full life. Lately my heart has been warnin' me thet I might not hev long to be heah. An' I couldn't go satisfied an' happy if you wasn't–"

"Oh, Nels!–Don't! Don't!" implored Madge poignantly, and she flew to throw her arms around his neck and lay her face against his hollow, bristling cheek. "Don't think such a thing! –It'd break my heart. Nels, you're my second dad. You taught me everything. You must not go away–and leave me."

"Wal, honey, I reckon there ain't any reason to be onduly scared. I was jest preparin' you. An' thet fetches me to the somethin' nearest my heart. It's this turrible love affair between you an' Lance."

"Turrible one-sided–yes," choked out Madge, hiding her face.

"Majesty, the boy is dyin' fer you. He's got it wuss than I ever seen any boy in all my life."

"How do you know?" she cried desperately.

"Wal, a blind man could see. But, lass, I'll give him away–double-cross him–if you say his case is not hopeless."

"Nels–darling–it's not–*quite* hopeless," she whispered.

"Aw, thet's fine! Wal, Lance has told me time an' again, an' this last time, the other night, he jest cried in his misery. It seems you hurt him turrible by believin' he was a gangster–a kidnaper–an' Gawd knows what. Lass, I cain't understand how you–so smart a girl–could ever make thet mistake."

"I did! I'm not smart. But I know *now*–and *that's* killing me."

"Wal, he's the finest youngster yore dad an' me ever met. Thet's all of thet. An' he loves you so much he suffers awful. I could tell you the things he does thet'd make you ashamed an' sorry. But this is enough. He told me thet he loved you so much he couldn't stay heah an' he couldn't leave. Now Majesty, I've told you–I've betrayed him. What do you say?"

"I can't say–much–when–I–I'm crying. But I–I love him more–than he loves me–and I'm dying of longing–and shame–"

"Thet's enough, lass," interrupted Nels, vastly disturbed by her weeping. "It's gonna be all right. What you must do is be clear enough to break his pride. He's stubborn as a mule."

"Break his pride! You mean–make him confess–he loves me?"

"Sartin I mean thet. An' you've gotta do somethin' onheered of an' powerful sweet thet won't give him no chance on earth."

"You darling old matchmaker–*I will*," promised Madge, and almost blind with ecstasy, she ran away, up into the solitary pines.

After dinner that night, during which she had been rapturously gay, to the wonder and delight of her parents, Madge put on one of her flimsiest, most shimmering gowns, with high-heeled white slippers to match. Wearing a long dark coat over this, she stole forth upon what seemed to her the most momentous and thrilling venture of her life.

She went by the patio and down through the pines by the trail. At this hour she knew Nels, her father perhaps, and surely the cowboys, would be at the store. As if by magic all her old imperious confidence, tempered this time by a secret humility and gratitude and love, returned in full force.

She could not lose, and that gave a tremendous zest to her venture.

Her blood raced with her thoughts and her heart throbbed high as she gained the level, and like a shadow glided across to the bunkhouses. Lance's was next to that occupied by Nels. She tiptoed down the porch, close to the wall until she came to Lance's open door. The yellow lights of the store cast a glow out upon the open.

She heard low voices and Sidway's laugh. That gave her pause. Could he be so deeply and miserably in love, as Nels had sworn, and laugh like any other fancy-free cowboy? What if that sly Nels had framed her? The thought was terrible. But she cast it aside as unworthy of a chastened and humble girl. Anyway, the die was cast.

Madge took off her clicking high-heeled slippers and stole into Lance's room and laid aside the long coat. Feeling around for his chair, she found it and curled up in it, shaking with excitement. Presently she dimly espied her picture on his table, and that overjoyed her.

It was done. She was there, in his room. Beyond Lance's finding her there she had not thought. This was far enough. Of all the things in the world, this was the last Lance Sidway would think of. It did not matter much what he did, when he found her there, unless he took her by the heels and dragged her out. He was capable of that, Madge thought.

Voices and jingling spurs enjoined silence. The men were approaching. Madge would have preferred that Lance come alone. For a moment she fought a wild need to laugh. How her blood was gushing through her veins!

Heavy footfalls upon the porch jarred the log cabin. Madge sat as quietly as a mouse, her heart pounding. She hoped Lance would not come to his room while the other men were in the bunkhouse. Still, no matter! She did not care what happened. Nels had cured her malady. She had all the cards in her hands.

The men, apparently three in number, filed into Nels's room.

"Strike a light, Nels," said Stewart.

"It's pretty darn warm," rejoined Sidway. "I won't light my lamp."

"Wal, Sid, you won't need to," added Nels. "Reckon you got kind of a glow aboot you."

"Nels, I've a mind to bounce something off your dome," declared the cowboy irritably, and then he laughed.

"Son, I'll smoke one of your cigarettes," said Stewart.

How Madge shook at that laconic epithet given Sidway by her father! Poor Lance! They were all in league against him—not a ghost of a show to escape!

"All right, we're set," went on her father seriously. "You're determined to ride away tomorrow?"

"Yes, Gene—I am," replied Lance sadly.

"There's a future here for you. This ranch will pay again some day. I'm glad to tell you that I'm going to pull through this tough time. Madge is helping me."

"By God! I *knew* she would," cried Lance passionately. "I'm glad, Gene. It's worried me a lot. Not that it's any of my business. She's swell. She's a Stewart, all right."

"I had that hunch myself."

"Wal," drawled Nels, "I always told you *hombres* thet Majesty was true-blue, a western girl at heart, an' one grand thoroughbred."

Then Stewart spoke: "Son, please tell me why you don't want to stay

here at Majesty's Rancho?"

"Gene, it can't be possible you don't know," retorted Lance. Then his laugh cut a little coldly, with a hopeless note. "Gene, to come straight out with the truth—I'm so mad over your beautiful daughter that I can't stand being any longer where I can see her."

"That's blunt and to the point," returned Stewart. "I'll speak the same way. I'd like you to be my son. Have you asked Madge to marry you?"

"Good heavens—no!" ground out Sidway, apparently tortured.

"Why not? Faint heart never won fair lady! I don't recall being very shy with Madeline. Was I, Nels?"

"Hell no!"

"Madge hates the very sight of me," declared Lance abjectly. "I've rubbed her the wrong way. I've bucked her in everything. Perhaps the last straw was her finding out that I had seen her bank statements and credits. But that wasn't my fault. Worse than that, my knowing about her flirtation with that gangster, Uhl—"

Suddenly Lance broke off, panic in his voice. "I didn't mean to tell you that—to give her away. I could kick myself."

"Son, you're not giving Madge away. I savvied that. And then she told me."

"She did? Holy cats!"

"She just casually spoke of it, as if for her it was okay. That has been bothering me—just how far it went!"

"Wal, Gene, thet doesn't bother me none," drawled Nels.

"But it should," flashed Stewart.

"Gene, I get you," spoke up Lance, with finality. "You want your old idea of respect back for Madge. I tell you, on my word of honor, that you may feel that respect. Madge Stewart has never done one single thing that she would hide from you—that she could not look you in the eyes and tell. Sure she is modern, sophisticated. She's a college girl. A radical, when it comes to mid-Victorian standards. But, get this, both of you. Even if she had been what you old fogies would call bad, it'd make no difference. Not to me! Not to anyone who knows her!"

"You win, son," came Stewart's quiet voice, a little husky. "Then, even if Madge were what you swear she is not—you'd make her your wife, if she cared for you?"

"My—heaven! Gene, you're thick-headed," declared Lance in despair. "Yes! *Yes!* And consider myself the luckiest fellow in the world—as I'd be the happiest."

Madge could not bear any more. Slipping out of the chair, she picked up her slippers, and softly went outside, to appear in the open doorway of Nels's room. She paused a moment, then entered.

The smile of beatitude that shone resplendent on Nels's visage, the sudden sinking of Stewart into a chair, as if his legs had suddenly grown weak, and Sidway's backing into the wall for support—these reactions sustained Madge in this emotional climax of her life.

"Madge! Where did you come from?" demanded Stewart.

"From Lance's room. I've been in there listening to you."

"For God's sake! Are you crazy, girl? What were you doing there?"

"Waiting for Lance. I'd framed a little stunt. But you've upset it."

"Yes. And what were you going to do—when he came?"

"Dad, I hadn't the slightest idea. But I know now."

She approached Sidway, so sure of her power to bestow happiness, that

his pale and working face did not deter her from prolonging his torture a little longer.

"Cowboy, you need someone to look after you," she stated sweetly. "Did you know I could make buttonholes and sew on buttons?"

"No. I couldn't imagine it," he returned hoarsely. "Did you learn that in college?"

"Mother taught me. I can mend socks, too. And make my own clothes, and I know how to cook and bake, too."

"You're--a--remarkably accomplished--young lady."

"Thank you. I wondered if you had found it out-- Are you interested in my waiting for you--in your room?"

Evidently it was utterly impossible for Lance to answer that.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I forgot. You and Dad and Nels spoiled my plot. Let's skip it."

She began to slide her gold-tan hands up the edges of his vest, and her eyes traveled with them. Then, in a flash, her arms encircled his neck, and she gave him her eyes, with all her heart and soul in them.

"I have much to thank you for," she said eloquently. "But even more than for my very life. I want to thank you for what you told Dad just now."

"Madge, please--don't," he rejoined unsteadily. "You're excited again. I don't want thanks."

"Wrong again, darl-- No, darling is out. I must find another word. Lance, I'm not excited. Just in a transport," and her hands slipped by one another, so that in another moment her arms were clasping his neck.

"Did it ever occur to you that I might have fallen in love with you at first sight--that day at the campus in L.A.?"

"It--certainly--didn't!" he gasped.

"Well, I did. And then wondering where you were, and if I could find you again, and then discovering you here where we have misunderstood each other and fought like cat and dog--all this while, Lance, it's grown worse, until I'm dying more for you than you are for me."

"Madge--for God's sake--for my sake--"

"Listen, Lance," she began again, lifting her lips until they were close to his. "If I should happen to throw another party--a *wedding* party, for instance--there would not be any punch. And--"

"Wait! Give me--a break!" he panted, his arms encircling her, and almost crushing the breath out of her.

"I'm giving you--a break," she whispered. "Only--don't break--my ribs." She could no longer endure the beseeching incredulous love light in his eyes, and hastened to her surrender.

She felt her willful spirit fading away in a deep and overpowering rapture, and the kiss she gave him almost prevented one last expression of her mischievous self.

"Sweetheart. You know I swore I'd have Umpqua," she said softly, at his lips.

He drew back startled, with questioning eyes. "Darling, you couldn't be --so--so," he replied, huskily, "just to make me give you Umpqua?"

"But that oughtn't be so hard--giving Umpqua--along with yourself," she whispered tremulously, and as she blindly sought his lips again, it seemed the end of their travail.

"Majesty! You can have him--and me forever," he said, with incredulous bliss. "I adored you--my heart was broken. But I'd live it all over again--for this!"

THE END

SNIFFING BIG DINERO, *Chief Ache-in-the-Back's creditors, real and fancied, make such a determined assault on the old redskin's thousand-dollar prize money that Justin Other Smith is impelled to do a rescue act. Nothing less than Injuncide, he finds, can bring them to taw. A ZGWM original.*

Murder in the Worst Degree

By Walker A. Tompkins

A "Paintin' Pistoleer" Yarn

IFN LEW PIRTLE could have just kept his big blabbermouth close-hobbled when this telegram from Washington Deceased come in over the wire, the citizens of Apache, Arizona, wouldn't have been scairt out of a year's growth by the terrible discovery Doc Grubb made in the town hoss trough. The Bloated Goat Saloon wouldn't have been haunted by walkin' ghosts, and certain prominent people wouldn't have become the laughing-stock of the Territory.

But no—whenever a message arrived on the Overland Telegraph addressed to anybody in Apache—which wasn't often—Lew Pirtle would git such a skinful of steam over his own impor-

tance, you'd think it was him who invented the telegraph, instead of Robert Fulton—as any schoolkid could have told him.

The telegram that broke up Apache's monopolous life and almost brung on a bloody Injun massacree, was from the U. S. Govermint, for old Chief Ache-in-the-Back out at the Cheery-cow reservation.

It informs the Chief that he has won first prize in a nation-wide contest held a month ago, to find a model for the new Injun-head penny which the mint aims to turn out. Said prize being $1,000 cash, which same is being sent to Ache-in-the-Back in care of the agent out at the reservation.

Soon as this message romped down the chutes at the Overland Telegraph office, Lew Pirtle lights a shuck over to the art studio upstairs over the Longhorn Saddle Shop, where Justin Other Smith is busy at a canvas which shows a 'Forty-Niner panning gold, which same will show up on a almanac cover or a calendar eventual. Justin O. is better known hereabouts as the "Paintin' Pistoleer" on account of him being the champeen pistol shot west of the Pecos.

"Chief Ache-in-the-Back done it, Justin O.!" Lew hollers, so proud you'd think he was fixin' to have a calf. "His mug is goin' to be on the Govermint's new one-cent coppers."

The Paintin' Pistoleer grins like *he's* going to git that prize money. This news means a lot to him, because it was Smith who paid the Chief's railroad fare out to Sacramento, Californy, to compete in this contest. Being a top-notch artist hisself, specializin' in Wild West subjecks, Smith figgers that Ache-in-the-Back's face was typical of the vanishin' American, and stood a chance to rake in that $1,000 jackpot the Dept. of the Treasury was offerin' for a redskin model. His gamble has paid off.

"I seen the Chief dust into town on that crowbait pony of his this mornin'," Justin O. says, shucking out of his artist's smock. "We'll prob'ly find him down at the Bloated Goat wanglin' a shot of firewater off Curly Bill Grane. Let's take a pasear down there and tell Ache-in-the-Back he's a rich man."

Just as Pirtle and Smith are climbin' the porch steps of the Bloated Goat, the batwings pop open and out flies Chief Ache-in-the-Back, screamin' like a goosed polecat—and he's cold sober, to boot. Speakin' of boots, Curly Bill's Size 12's have just made a connection with that part of the Chief's anatomy where the sun never shines, which sends the old Injun tail-over-tincup to pile into Lew Pirtle and the Paintin' Pistoleer. All three of 'em are bowled acrost the plank sidewalk and wind up tangled like pretzels under the saloon hitchrack.

Curly Bill comes out the door dusting off his palms and bellers, "That no-good redskin just got through bustin' my five-hunderd-buck backbar mirror into a million chunks, the mangey skonk! For years I've looked the other way while Ache-in-the-Back filled his gut at my free lunch counter. I've risked goin' to jail more'n once to slip him a shot of red-eye. But this bustin' my backbar glass is the last straw that the drownin' camel snatched at."

Smith and Lew Pirtle help Ache-in-the-Back to his feet. Right now, seein' the Chief at his worst, it's hard to tell how he won this contest to git on the Injun-head penny. His face looks noble, mebbe, when it's decked out in warpaint and a feather bonnet; but

from the jaw on down, Ache-in-the-Back couldn't have modeled for a cigar store's wooden Injun.

His chest is as thin and slatty as two foldin' chairs put back to back; his stomach pouches out like the bottom of a bowlin'-pin. His laigs are bamboo fishpoles and his arms are skinny enough to embarrass a skeleton. Wrop up that package in a greasy poncho blanket and a pair of cast-off waist overhalls, and you've got Chief Ache-in-the-Back, which the Govermint has just immortaled by choosin' his face for their new one-cent pieces.

"Why'd you break Curly Bill's lookin'-glass, chief?" scolds the Paintin' Pistoleer, who is the only friend the old Injun has in town. "Don't you know Mr. Grane ain't allowed to sell likker to an Injun? You want the sheriff to lock Mr. Grane in the hoosegow just because you sashayed into town with a dry tongue?"

By this time quite a crowd has collected. There's old Sol Fishman, who runs the O. K. Mercantile, and who in turn is run by his new bride, the former Prunella Peebles; Dyspepsia Dan of the Feedbag Cafe; Sheriff Rimfire Cudd; Jim Groot the Banker; Lawyer Plato X. Scrounge; and a few other regulars who spend most of their time roundsidin' at the Bloated Goat bar.

"I got to admit," speaks up Jim Groot, "that the Chief didn't bust that mirror a-purpose. Him and me was playin' tit-tat-toe on the mirror with a hunk of lye soap, and when I won ten games out of ten, the Chief lost his temper and heaved the soap at the glass. Only what he picked up wasn't the bar of soap like he thought, but that chunk of peetrified wood Curly Bill keeps on his backbar along with his other curios."

Curly Bill does some plain and fancy cussin'. "Makes no diff," he says. "I'm out five hunderd for a new lookin'-glass for my customers to preen their mustaches in. And where would that flea-bitten Injun git that kind of money?"

Well, it was right here where Lew Pirtle has to open his big blabber-mouth and stick both feet into it.

"But the Chief can pay for them damages, Curly Bill," he says. "Justin O. and me was just comin' in to inform Ache-in-the-Back that he won that prize contest for the design of the new copper you penny-ante poker players will be usin'—one thousand pesos!"

Well, when that news soaks in, you could see more'n one pair of eyes start to schemin'. Sol Fishman is the first man to bust the silence, Chief Ache-in-the-Back bein' so floored by this news that he's unable to do anything but stand there openin' and shuttin' his mouth like a landed trout gaspin' for air.

Sol says, "I think you-all remember the time the Chief snuck into my store an' stole three hundred bucks' worth of blankets and applejack cider. I want to go on record as claimin' my share o' that thousand, boys."

The old Injun groans like he's just sat on a red-hot brandin'-iron. He ain't never confessed to robbin' Fishman's store, but the day after the robbery the thief's moccasins was discovered stuck in a keg of tar he had stood on to reach a high shelf. Nobody doubted who owned them moccasins, because no Injun since the dawn of time ever had a pair of feet like Ache-in-the-Back. It was as if 20 inches of his laigs had been turned under, and whenever he needed a new pair of moccasins, instead of his squaw making same out

of buckskin, Ache-in-the-Back could just as well step into a couple of suitcases and walk off. Sheriff Cudd never jailed the Chief, claimin' he didn't want to git fleas in his jailhouse.

"I'd like to remind everybody," speaks up Dyspepsia Dan, "about the time Ache-in-the-Back got a bun on after drinkin' a quart of my vanilla extract, and broke all the dishes in my cafe. That spree cost me close onto a hunderd bucks, not countin' the vanilla extract. I'm right relieved to hear that the Chief will make that good."

Well, the Chief starts blubberin'. He turns to Jim Groot the banker and says, "Me no good at figgers. Got one thousand bucks come. After pay-um bills, how much wampum left?"

Groot does some mental tally work and says, "Off hand, Chief, I think yore prize has been whittled down to about a hundred. Of which Missus Samanthie Coddlewort may want a cut, for the pink corset you stole off her clothesline last Christmas—said corset showing up on yore squaw later on."

Ache-in-the-Back begins to moan and beller like he's tied to a torture stake and pickled in coal oil, with these creditors of hisn closin' in with lighted matches.

"I had heap good plan for that wampum," the old redskin whimpers to Justin Other Smith. "My son, Little Gopher, want to catch-um schooling at Injun college, learn to be good chief for Cheery-cow tribe after go to happy huntin' grounds."

Now, everybody in Stirrup County knows how the Chief's oldest son, Little Gopher, is honin' to enroll in an Injun college and make something of hisself. This $1,000 could put Little Gopher through two-three years of college. He was a likable young buck, no booze-hound liken his old man, and this moves the Paintin' Pistoleer to suggest:

"It would be a dirty shame for Little Gopher to suffer for the sins of his no-account father, boys. Instead of slappin' attachments on this prize money, why not make Ache-in-the-Back live up to his good intentions by indorsin' that check over to his boy, so Little Gopher can go away to college?"

Sol and Dyspepsia Dan and Curly Bill get their noses together in a huddle and might have agreed to Smith's beg for mercy, if Lawyer Scrounge hadn't stuck his bill in. No hand to pass up a chance to rake in some legal fees, Plato X. buttonholes these clients and it winds up with Plato X. telling the Chief that he represents these plaintiffs and the Chief will either settle his suits out of court or else be sued for everything but his teeth, of which he ain't got but two left.

Ache-in-the-Back beats a retreat and disappears. Later Curly Bill ketches the Chief down in the wine cellar, trying to uncork a whisky bottle to drown his sorrows, although said sorrows are so husky by now they can prob'ly swim. For the second time in one day the old redskin leaves the Bloated Goat Saloon faster than he come in, his backside branded with the mark of both of Curly Bill's hobnail boots.

Durin' the next few days the news about that $1,000 grapevines all over Stirrup County, and Lawyer Scrounge digs up a batch of customers who claim Ache-in-the-Back is guilty of various petty larsons in the past which they will sue for. These charges range from rustlin' beef from the north-county ranches to high-gradin' ore at the Sacatone diggin's. Most of these charges are

fakes trumped up by Plato X. Scrounge, aimed to git a cut out of the Chief's jackpot, but there's enough bony-fide complaints that would stick in court to more than gobble up Little Gopher's college money.

Well, about a week later, the old Chief shows up at the Paintin' Pistoleer's studio, feelin' lower than a snake's belly. The agent out to the reservation has turned over a package from Californy, and a registered letter. The package contains a plaster-of-paris statue of Ache-in-the-Back's head, which a sculpter had made from the life mask he took offn the Chief's face in Californy and has sent him for a keepsake. The original has gone to Washington Deceased to use as a model for the Injun-head penny.

The registered letter, which the Chief has Justin O. Smith read for him, is the govermint's check for $1,000. The Chief has a propostion to make. He wants to swap that check for five bucks.

"Me ketch-um hell from all palefaces but you," Ache-in-the-Back finishes his spiel. "Me take five bucks, throw in statue to boot."

The Paintin' Pistoleer shakes his head. "No soap," he says in that soft Alabama drawl of hisn. And from the pained look on the Chief's face, he knows Ache-in-the-Back don't want to hear the word "soap" mentioned in his hearing. "That'd be like stealing your prize, Chief. You'd wind up busted and minus your bust."

Lookin' around the studio, Ache-in-the-Back spies Justin O.'s famous .32 Colt on a .45 frame hangin' from a wall peg. Before the Paintin' Pistoleer knows what's up, the Chief grabs that smokepole, puts the muzzle agin' his noggin an' squeezes the trigger.

Luckily Smith keeps his six-gun empty, or he'd have had a suicide to clean up right there on the spot, Chief Ache-in-the-Back was feelin' that despondent.

Later on that evenin', after he has tried to pert up the old Injun's spirits, the Paintin' Pistoleer goes into the Bloated Goat Saloon to get his buttermilk nightcap. He's roundsiding with the boys, telling them how miserable the Injun is, when the batwings swing open and in walks Apache's medico, Doc Sigmoid Grubb, who is likewise the county coroner.

Grubb is sober, which is onusual for him. He sizes up the barroom crowd as serious as a hen tryin' to hatch a china doorknob, and he says, "I got somethin' to show a few of you fellers, down in front of the livery barn. Meanin' you, Curly Bill; you, Dyspepsia Dan; and you, Sol Fishman. Sheriff Cudd, mebbe you better mosey along with us. Murder's been done in Apache tonight, and the aforementioned hombres are to blame."

Well, you couldn't have held back the crowd with a shotgun, after they heard Doc Grubb say "murder." Lawyer Scrounge, sniffing more business, herds his three clients out the door behind Grubb. Follerin' him comes a passle of cowhands in town buckin' the tiger, a jag of muckers from the Sacatone mines, and everybody else who ain't too spifflicated to walk.

Doc Grubb is packin' a lantern as he heads off down the street toward the stable. The excitement draws the whole town along, even emptyin' the lodge hall where the Apache Ladies' Knitting & Peach Presarves Society is holding a spiritualist seance put on by Sol Fishman's new wife, Prunella. Since marryin' Sol, Prunella has made

quite a rep for herself tellin' fortunes, readin' people's periscopes, and that kind of hokus pokus.

Doc Grubb won't explain what he's up to. He just leads the crowd over to the big hoss trough in front of the livery stable, and holds up his lantern so it shines down into the water.

Sheriff Rimfire Cudd, his eyes poppin' over his cheekbones like goose aigs, he hauls out his six-shooter and takes first peek into the trough. Whatever he sees in the water must have been bad—his own reflection, mebbe—anyhow, he keels over in a dead faint.

Plato X. Scrounge takes the next look at whatever Doc Grubb has discovered, and his store teeth start rattlin' like loaded dice. Prunella Fishman is the first woman to git up nerve enough to see what the lantern is shinin' on, and she lets out a screech that must have caused considerable spinnin' in the graves over on Boothill.

The Paintin' Pistoleer has his look, and he looks kind of sick as he says, "I didn't think the Chief would do it—"

Well, what was under that water was a body wropped in an old blanket like that trough was a coffin. Its sightless eyes was starin' up through the water at the lantern, and no bubbles was comin' out of the nose or mouth.

"Friends," Doc Grubb says dismal, "here lie the mortal remains of our old friend, Chief Ache-in-the-Back. He was either intoxicated and fell into this trough whilst tryin' to douse his head in the water, or else he deliberate clumb in and drowned hisself dead. Whatever happened, as coroner of Stirrup County, Arizona Territory, I hereby pronounce this a case of murder in the worst degree."

Somebody has slopped a bucket of water on Rimfire Cudd, who comes to just in time to hear Doc's last words.

"M-Murder?" the sheriff splutters. "You got any idear who the culprit of this foul deed is, Doc? You say the word an' I'll clap the guilty hombre in jail. Never was a more decenter Injun drawed a breath than my amigo Ache-in-the-Back."

Grubb swings a long p'intin' finger around the crowd.

"You ain't got jail-room to accommodate the rannihans responsible for the Chief's death, Sheriff," he says in a voice like a organ playin' a funeral march. "Ache-in-the-Back was literal hounded to death by his greedy creditors, some of which are in this crowd right now. Vultures closin' in like a pack o' lobos to glom onto the prize money this pore old redskin had won honest."

Well, the crowd busts up, mighty subdued by this here tragedy. Doc couldn't get nobody but Smith to volunteer to help in the grisly job of hauling the corpus out of that trough. Grubb yanks the plug and drains the water off, covers the remains with a hoss blanket, and him and Smith pack the Chief over to Grubb's funeral parlor.

An hour or so later Doc an' the Paintin' Pistoleer return to the Bloated Goat, where the town has gathered to discuss the suicide in bated tones. And with them, by hokies, is Missus Prunella Fishman, the first woman ever to lay a hoof inside Curly Bill's place.

"I sent Samanthie Coddlewort's boy Perc'val over to the Injun agency to notify Little-Gopher-Behint-the-Eightball that his father has gone to the happy huntin' grounds," Doc says, ordering a double shot of Blue Bagpipe, neat. "You know, I tremble to think what will happen to Apache when

those Injuns have time to think this over. It wouldn't surprise me a partickle ifn them braves don't bust offn the reservation an' burn this whole town to the ground—after collectin' ever hank of hair they can lay a knife on."

Sheriff Cudd and Sol Fishman, both bald as posts, rub their domes to iron off the goose pimples.

"Prunelly darlin'," Sol pipes up meekly, "I never thought I'd live to see the day a wife o' mine would be caught inside a saloon!"

Prunella clears her throat and glares at her husband.

"Murder has been done tonight," she says, "and you, Solomon, my own beloved husbind, are one of the murderers. There is only one thing can be done to save this town from an Indian attack, and that is to get Chief Ache-in-the-Back's forgiveness for what Apache has done to him."

Curly Bill Grane lets out with a big groan.

"With the Chief stretched cold an' stiff in a coffin over at Doc's morgue," he says, "how in hell are we goin' to git his forgiveness? He's past revivin' with artificial restitution."

The Paintin' Pistoleer sticks in his bill then. "Missus Fishman," he says respectful-like, "had quite a reputation as a clairvoyant before she come to Arizona, I understand."

The boys stare at each other, puzzled.

"A clear what kind of an aunt?" Sheriff Cudd finally draws up enough wind to inquire.

"A spiritualist medium," Smith goes on to explain. "Missus Fishman tells me she can hold a seance before the Injuns come to pick up their Chief. In other words, she believes she can commune with Ache-in-the-Back's departed spirit and git him to tell his son and heir, Little Gopher, that he has forgiven Sol and Curly Bill and Dyspepsia Dan for hounding him into committing suicide. That should spare Apache the horrors of a massacre."

Well, everbody in the barroom starts fawnin' on Prunella as if she was the pertiest girl in the world, which is really something, seeing as how Missus Fishman is built like a brick smokehouse, with a face that would "make time stop in its flight," as the poet says—or as Sol put it onct while in his cups, "stop a clock."

"How soon can you whomp up this see-ants, ma'am?" Dyspepsia Dan asks. His face is as green as pea soup, and not entirely from the chronicle indigestion he suffers from. "How do you go about riggin' up a powwow with a drowned Injun? When'll you pull it off?"

Prunella fingers the mustache fuzz on her lip.

"Tomorrow at midnight," she says. She lays a bright eye on Curly Bill, who cringes back behind his bar. "We will hold this psychic communion with the dead," she tells Curly Bill, "inside your saloon, Mr. Grane. On account of I understand that the deceased enjoyed your place of business more than any other spot in town. He would be more apt to consider coming back to earth if we staged the seance in the—harrumph—Bloated Goat."

Curly Bill gags like he's seasick. "No dice," he says. "I can't have no ghosts visitin' the Bloated Goat. I'd never git another smidgin of trade in here if the word got out that dead Injuns was ha'ntin' my bar."

But outraged public opinion overruled Curly Bill's objections, especial-

ly when Lawyer Scrounge threatens to git a writ of halibut's corpuscles filed agin the Bloated Goat if Grane won't allow this sidekick medium to use his barroom for her see-ants.

Sol Fishman and Dyspepsia Dan put in their taws, claiming they won't sleep well the rest of their lives unlessen they git forgiven for what they done to Chief Ache-in-the-Back; besides which, Apache should be given its chance to grow up with the country, which it couldn't do if the Cheery-cows go on the warpath.

The upshot of it all is that when Curly Bill locks up for the night, the whole county knows that tomorrow night, Missus Fishman aims to wheedle the Chief's spook into puttin' in an appearance at her see-ants, and, if Ache-in-the-Back is in a forgivin' mood, to tell Little Gopher not to let the tribe raid the white people for revenge.

Next morning Sheriff Rimfire Cudd is pestered by reports of a minor crime wave sweepin' acrost town. Sol Fishman has had a tin funnel stole from the O. K. Mercantile's vinegar barrel, and Jim Groot's wife, Hernia, comes in complainin' that a thief filched a new mail-order garden hose out of her berry patch.

Now, ordinary these robberies would have been blamed pronto on Chief Ache-in-the-Back, whose sticky fingers always caused trouble on his visits to town. But you couldn't very well blame these pilferings onto that pore redskin, not when his body was embalmed and lyin' in state in a pine coffin over at the funeral parlor.

All day long, folks filed past Doc Grubb's front window, takin' their last look at the pore old Injun most of them had kicked and browbeat for years. Spetunia Spoot Pirtle, who only last week had clubbed the old Injun with a two-by-four for suckin' eggs in her henhouse, looks down at the still, relaxed face in the coffin an' blubbers piously, "I declare, Doc Grubb did a good job on the Chief. I never seen Ache-in-the-Back look healthier, or more chipper."

Late in the day, Little Gopher rides in from the Cheery-cow reservation, him being the principal guest at Prunella's see-ants tonight. The young buck don't show how he feels, being a Injun, but he's busted up perty bad over his dad's death.

He confides to Sheriff Rimfire Cudd that unless his father's ghost does some tall talkin' tonight, there's no telling what the Cheery-cows are li'ble to do. Little Gopher says the warriors are already daubin' on their trouble paint and thumpin' their tom-toms, and have spent the day honin' tomahawks an' stroppin' scalpin'-knives.

All in all, it looks like Apache's chances to escape a massacree depends on the success of Prunella's powwow with a ghost.

Dyspepsia Dan treats Little Gopher to his special 40-cent deluxe supper over at the Feedbag Cafe, telling Gopher what a fine old daddy he had, honest as the day is long, and the like of that. Along about sundown Sol Fishman goes over to the art studio where Little Gopher is visitin' with Justin Other Smith, bringin' him a brand new blanket and a coffee can filled with glass beads. He tells Little Gopher that him and the Chief was bosom buddies, old tillicums from 'way back.

And Curly Bill Grane sneaks Little Gopher into an alley after it gets dark and tells him that no matter how the law reads, he'll keep Little Gopher

supplied with firewater, on the house, for as long as he can swaller it down, even if it's 50 years.

Little Gopher turns up his nose to this proposition, saying that all he wants is the privilege of going off to college and preparing himself to be a good chief for his tribe.

"If I had that prize money my father won," Little Gopher points out, "I'd already be on my way to Indian University. But you greedy palefaces wanted to get that money and as a result my martyred father drowned himself rather than face the tribe."

Prunella's see-ants was set for what she called the witching hour of midnight, that being the time ghosts get limbered up for taking strolls on earth. She tells Doc Grubb it is okay to lock up the morgue, that she ain't interested in the drowned corpus of the old Chief; the spirit she aims to communicate with is up in the Great Father's teepee in the sky, where whisky comes in bathtubs.

So, when the courthouse clock strikes 14—which means midnight or thereabouts, on account of pack rats and mud-daubers' nests having balled up the clockworks—Prunella Fishman is escorted in style to the Bloated Goat Saloon by an honor guard composed of the Ladies' Knitting & Peach Presarves Society.

Sheriff Cudd is posted at the batwings with his .45, to keep out everybody except those who will sit in on the see-ants. Which same includes the three murderers, Sol Fishman, Curly Bill Grane, and Dyspepsia Dan; their legal counsel, Lawyer Plato X. Scrounge; the dead man's heir, Little Gopher; and the Paintin' Pistoleer. Missus Fishman says Smith ought to be included, seein' as how Chief Ache-in-the-Back had left his $1,000 prize check at Justin's studio an hour before he drowned hisself.

For purposes of the see-ants, Missus Fishman had arranged for all the furniture, spittoons, and such like to be cleared out of the Bloated Goat barroom except for one circular poker table and seven chairs. She has Sheriff Cudd padlock the door to keep out what she calls the morbid and ribald element, who might disturb the Chief's ghost, and stations Cudd on guard—which wasn't hard to arrange, because the sheriff couldn't have been drug inside that saloon tonight with a jerkline string of mules.

Prunella has her guests set down at the poker table, put their arms on the baize, and make a circle of clasped hands. Then she blows out all the lamps, and hunkers down at her place by the table. It's pretty spooky in this darkness, and everybody present is sweatin' like a wrung-out mop rag, though it's a coolish night.

"Now before I go into my psychic transom," Missus Fishman begins, "I want to explain that my supernatural powers should not frighten anyone present, be they guilty or innocent. You will hear the ghost of Chief Ache-in-the-Back rap on this table. If my clairvoyant powers are in tune with the vibrations of the Spirit World, our lamented Indian friend may even go so far as to lift this table off the floor to prove his presence among us. It is my hope that the Chief may actually speak to us from Beyond the Veil."

Everybody's hands is tremblin' so bad the legs of the poker table are already sendin' out rappin' noises.

"As is necessary in all psychic manifestations," Prunella goes on to explain, "this seance must be conducted

in absolute silence and total darkness. Anyone lifting a hand off the table will break my chain of concentration and scare the Chief back to the happy hunting ground. The point I want to make is, gentlemen, don't be frightened by whatever transpires here tonight. The Chief's ghost is not an evil spirit. If his phantom comes to us, it will be in the spirit of friendship—something which this benighted town never granted to Ache-in-the-Back during his persecuted lifetime. We are now ready to proceed with the seance. I don't want anyone to speak or move while I am in my transom."

Well, it was plumb doubtful if anybody at that poker table could have spoke ifn he'd had anything to say. When Sol Fishman gulped, it was like dropping a rock into a deep well. The Paintin' Pistoleer had his hands between Dyspepsia Dan's and Lawyer Scrounge's and they was both as icy as a polar bear's tail.

Prunella Fishman begun makin' mysterious moanin' noises, chantin' an' rockin' up and down in her chair. After a few minutes of this business, she says in a spooky whisper, "O spirit of the departed Chief Ache-in-the-Back, if you have returned in protoplasmic form to this infamous planet, signify by rapping the table twice."

The Paintin' Pistoleer stifles a grunt of pain when he gits kicked twice on the kneecap by Missus Fishman's high-buttoned shoe. Next time she corrects her aim, and two ghostly raps sound on the under side of the table.

"Your father's spirit is at my elbow, Little Gopher," Prunella whispers to the young Indian at her side. Then she puts on her ghost-talking voice and whispers, "If you are ready to commune with your medium, O spirit, signify by lifting this table with your invisible hands. Remember, gentlemen—don't get frightened."

Justin Other Smith hauls his legs back pronto this time, to keep from gettin' his shins barked. He feels the table lift an inch or so offn the floor, Prunella gruntin' with the effort of her mental concentration.

"And now, O spirit," sings out Prunella, "if it be thy will, speak to us from the silence of the grave. Now don't be scared, gents!"

In the darkness nobody sees Prunella stand up and fish in her bustle for the speaking trumpet she smuggled into the saloon. Before she can put the horn to her lips, though, a ghostly voice says out of thin air somewhere overhead:

"*First thing Chief want is for old she-blister squaw to light-um lamp so ghost can see who wants to smoke peace pipe.*"

There is a noise from Missus Fishman's side of the table like air leakin' out of a punctured balloon, followed by a crash which shakes the whole building.

"I'll light a lamp for you, ma'am," the Paintin' Pistoleer speaks up, after a minute's silence. "That okay, O spirit?"

"*Ugh! Heap good!*" answers the ghost voice.

Smith scratches a match on his pants and lights the lamp on the table. The first thing the light shows is the prostrate body of Prunella Fishman, sprawled out like a sack of oats on the barroom floor, her chair busted to kindlin' wood under her weight. The medium has got a brass horn in one hand.

"She's fainted, Sol," Justin O. explains. "That shows how hard a medium concentrates when she goes into

her trance."

Nobody says a word, everybody bein' plumb paralyzed, but their eyes dart around like marbles, expectin' to see the transparent phantom of a drowned Injun stalkin' the room. Nobody sees nothing.

"You still around, O great chief's spirit?" the Paintin' Pistoleer takes over, Prunella being out like a light.

"*Damn tootin' me here,*" comes the hollow voice from nowhere in particklar. It's like somebody talkin' from the bottom of a rain barrel, but there's no doubting it's Ache-in-the-Back speakin'. "*Unless Little Gopher get-um prize check, me stick around to haunt three palefaces now hunkered down at powwow table.*"

This is too much for Sol, Dan, and Curly, who knock over their chairs gittin' to their feet. They tear out for the batwings, neck an' neck like hydrophoby dogs chasin' a cat, forgettin' the door is padlocked. They crash back on the sawdust, half knocked out. Sprawled there on the floor, Sol says to Lawyer Scrounge:

"Tell the Chief we don't want his money!"

"Yeah," groans Dyspepsia Dan. "Them dishes he broke was no account anyhow. He's welcome to my vanilla extract any time."

Curly Bill manages to git to his knees. He clasps his hands together like he's prayin' and moans out, "The Chief done me a favor bustin' that blistered-up old mirror nohow. An' I'll confess to overchargin' him. I kin replace it for a hunderd an' fifty."

The Paintin' Pistoleer makes a sign to Plato X. Scrounge to do the talkin' for the three murderers. The lawyer says in a kind of mouse-squeak voice:

"O great spirit, the money will go to your noble warrior son. All garnisheements agin yore prize are hereby null, void, and withdrawed. I'll even return my retainer fees to the plaintiffs."

A grunting sound comes out of somewhere. "*Heap good,*" the Chief's spirit says. "*Pay Little Gopher.*"

Justin Other Smith hands over the Chief's prize money to Little Gopher, who looks up toward heaven and says, "Thanks, O great and good sire. Your tribe will honor your memory forever."

"*Okay,*" says the spirit voice. "*Me go now. But first, me return all water I soaked up in Apache hoss trough.*"

The spook's voice sort of fades out on this remark, along with some squeakin' of ceiling boards, and then a jet of muddy water comes spouting through a knothole overhead, splashing the poker table and dousing Prunella Fishman smack in the face.

Well, this physical manifestation of the supernatural is too much for the see-ants audience. Lawyer Scrounge takes a running dive out the glass window, followed by Fishman, Dyspepsia Dan, and Curly Bill, faster than the devil fryin' hoss thieves.

Sheriff Rimfire Cudd and the big crowd out front, they see them four take off for the mesquites like Satan hisself was after 'em with a hot pitchfork. A minute later Little Gopher straddles out of the busted window, pocketing his $1,000 check.

The last to leave the haunted barroom was Justin O. Smith, who had his hands full lugging 240 pounds of spiritualist medium on his back. That deluge had revived Prunella, who started squalling at the top of her lungs. The minute Smith got her set down, she kited off into the desert outside of town, whoopin' bloody murder.

The crowd started to close in on the

Paintin' Pistoleer to ask some questions, when all of a suddint Rimfire Cudd points toward the roof, yells like a stuck shoat and lit out for the jailhouse, where he locked hisself up for the rest of the night. And he wasn't the only one who decided to put some geography behind him pronto. Before Justin O. could ketch his breath, the street was deserted complete.

The cause for this sudden mass migration to elsewhere was the appearance of the dead Injun, Chief Ache-in-the-Back, crawling out of the Bloated Goat's attic window. The chief crawled down the porch awning, hops to the gutter, picks hisself up, and gives the Paintin' Pistoleer a wink. Then he clumb through the broken window.

A few minutes later Ache-in-the-Back shows up outside, perty well heeled for a corpse that's been dead for 24 hours. He has a couple fifths of Blue Bagpipe tucked under each arm, and a belt full of assorted brandy, tequila, beer, gin, wine, and ordinary rotgut, and both his fists are full of corkscrews.

Little Gopher takes his father's arm and they head down to the livery stable to git the Chief's crowbait pony. The only folks on hand to see them Injuns light out for the reservation were the Paintin' Pistoleer and Doc Sigmoid Grubb. Grubb has leaned out of the attic window, laughin' hisself sick.

"What'll I do with this tin funnel you stuck into the garden hose that the Chief done his talkin' through durin' the see-ants, Justin O.?" the medico calls down.

The Paintin' Pistoleer grins. "Pull the hose out of that knothole in the ceilin' and let the stuff lie for a few days, Doc. Curly Bill won't be snoopin' around in his attic an' we might as well keep the town guessin' about this deal."

A little later Doc Grubb and the Paintin' Pistoleer went over to the morgue to clean up the other evidence, which same consisted of the blanket-wropped dummy they'd fished out of the horse trough. The head of this dummy was Chief Ache-in-the-Back's plaster statue, which Justin O. Smith had painted up lifelike with black hair, copper skin, dirty ears, and the like. Even outside of the water trough, that plaster bust looked so natural that Doc Grubb was moved to allow that it was the masterpiece of Smith's career as an artist.

"This fake suicide was a dirty trick to pull on Missus Fishman and the town," the Paintin' Pistoleer admits, "but I figger it was worth it to get those creditors out of the Chief's hair and put his money to a good cause. Little Gopher deserved his chance to attend Indian college."

After they'd put the coffin back in storage Doc Grubb says, "Sluicin' that bucket o' slop-water down the hose was my idear, Justin O. As a medical practitioner, I figgered that was the best way to revive that medjum out of her trance. Now, what say we hoist a drink on the success of this little hoax we rigged up? I got a bottle of twenty-year-old brandy in my bedroom closet."

But it turns out the bottle of brandy had been stole out of Doc's closet, along with his gold watch, a couple celluloid buckwing collars, an elk's tooth, a mustache cup, and everything else that was portable.

Which warn't surprisin', seein' as how old Chief Ache-in-the-Back had spent the day hid in Doc's bedroom while the grieving population of Apache filed past his bier out front.

The Hickok Legend

By CARL SMITH

JAMES BUTLER HICKOK *was plenty wild enough but, with an assist or two from Hickok himself, the writers have succeeded in making him too wild to be true. Assuming a here-now-let's-see-just-what-there-is-to-this-thing attitude, the author has taken a close look at the record for the benefit of ZGWM readers.*

"*MR. HICKOK, how many white men have you killed to your certain knowledge?*"

After a little deliberation, he replied, "I suppose I have killed considerably over a hundred."

Western writers have not deliberately dealt in nonsense. The worst they can be charged with—aside from a few notable exceptions—is gullibility; they have been victimized by a body of tall tales, legends, and occasional out-and-out hoaxes which have been woven so skillfully into the fabric of Western history that it has become difficult to separate fact from fancy. The legends are now so firmly implanted that, despite the efforts of a few honest writers to kill them, they seem to have more lives than a wagonload of cats. A prime example is the case of James Butler Hickok.

The question quoted above, which allegedly provoked an answer from Wild Bill to the effect that he had made it possible for considerably over a hundred white men to join their ancestors, was put to him by Henry M. Stanley—the same Mr. Stanley of the *New York Herald* who achieved a small measure of immortality with another and more famous question: "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

It will probably never be known, at this late date, whether Stanley misunderstood Hickok, whether Wild Bill was pulling his leg, or whether Stanley simply upped the ante to make a good story better—as writers are sometimes known to do. In any case, Stanley does not bear the burden of guilt alone. He is one of a long series of writers, including General Custer, Mrs. Custer, Buffalo Bill Cody, various dime-novel authors, and a number of respectable authors of recent years, all of whom have contributed by their incautious statements to the building of the Hickok legend.

Unquestionably, however, the leading culprits are a brace of writers who were Hickok's contemporaries, George Ward Nichols and J. W. Buel—and of these, the greatest is Nichols. A

Civil War volunteer who had risen to the rank of lieutenant-colonel a short time before his discharge, and who preferred to be called Colonel Nichols, this man gave Hickok what was probably his first bit of nationwide publicity, in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, in 1867.

Nichols, according to his account, happened into Springfield, Missouri, shortly after the shooting in which Hickok killed Dave Tutt. This occurred about a year and a half previous to the publication of the article. The writer seems to have been in a receptive mood for swallowing the yarns which always flourish on the frontier. He had, he admits, been hearing stories of Hickok's prowess well in advance of their meeting, and "the hero of these strange tales took shape in my mind as did Jack the Giant Killer or Sindbad the Sailor in childhood days."

Though Nichols found it difficult to believe some of the stories, he tells us, when he came face to face with this superman of the frontier he "remembered the story in the Bible, where we are told that Samson 'with the jawbone of an ass slew a thousand men,' and as I looked upon this magnificent example of human strength and daring, he appeared to me to realize the powers of a Samson and Hercules combined, and I should not have been inclined to place any limits upon his achievements."

The uncritical Mr. Nichols subsequently entertained his readers with, among other things, an account of the McCanles affair in which Hickok had figured some seven years earlier, and thereby gave birth to one of the most persistent and most outrageous of the many Hickok legends. Nichols reported that he had heard something of this from an army officer with the unlikely name of Captain Honesty, and that upon meeting Hickok he got the story in his hero's own words.

Hickok, in the Nichols version, says that he was leading a detachment of cavalry through southern Nebraska when he separated from them one afternoon to visit a friend, one Mrs. Waltman. He found her, in a state of great agitation, in her cabin; she informed him that "M'Kandlas and his gang" were in the vicinity looking for him, swearing to "cut yer heart out." Hickok explains that M'Kandlas—so Nichols spells the name—was "the Captain of a gang of desperadoes, horse-thieves, murderers, regular cut-throats, who were the terror of everybody on the border." He'd had some difficulties with Hickok "in the mountains" but, Nichols has Hickok say, "bime-by he clar'd out, and I shouldn't have thought of the feller agin ef he hadn't crossed my path. It 'pears he didn't forget me."

(Stanley reported incidentally, that Hickok "has none of the barbaric jargon" of many frontiersmen, but "on the contrary, his language is as good as many a one who boasts 'college larning.'")

This gang of ten fearful assassins, led by M'Kandlas, discovered Hickok in Mrs. Waltman's cabin and set upon him with murderous intent. The story of what ensued, set down by Nichols supposedly in Hickok's own words, is hair-raising:

He [M'Kandlas] jumped inside the room with his gun leveled to shoot; but he was not quick enough. My rifle-ball went through his heart. . . .

Then the ruffians came rushin' in at both doors. How wild they looked with their red, drunken faces and inflamed

eyes, shouting and cussing! But I never aimed more deliberately in my life.

One–two–three–four; and four men fell dead.

That didn't stop the rest. Two of them fired their bird-guns at me. And then I felt a sting run all over me. The room was full of smoke. Two got in close to me, their eyes glaring out of the clouds. One I knocked down with my fist. . . . The second I shot dead. The other three clutched me and crowded me onto the bed. I fought hard. I broke with my hand one man's arm. . . . Before I could get to my feet I was struck across the breast with the stock of a rifle, and I felt the blood rushing out of my nose and mouth. Then I got ugly, and I remember that I got hold of a knife, and then it was all cloudy like, and I was wild, and I struck savage blows, following the devils up from one side to the other of the room and into the corners, striking and slashing until I knew that every one was dead.

All of a sudden it seemed as if my heart was on fire. I was bleeding everywhere . . . . There were eleven buckshot in me. I carry some of them now. I was cut in thirteen places. All of them bad enough to have let out the life of a man. But that blessed old Dr. Mills pulled me safe through it, after a bed siege of many a long week.

Thus the Nichols version. The only details on which it is not strictly accurate are: Hickok was not leading a detachment of cavalry anywhere; the encounter did not take place at the cabin of a Mrs. Waltman; M'Kandlas (correctly, McCanles) was not the leader of a band of cutthroats, but a reasonably peaceable citizen; there were not ten men involved, but three men and a 12-year-old boy, none of whom appears to have been armed, or indeed had even so much as a toothpick for weapons, while Hickok had the support of two men and a woman; Hickok had neither 11 buckshot nor 13 knife wounds in his body, and in fact did not receive a scratch. Finally, Hickok and two other men were haled into court on a murder charge as a result of the affair.

To begin with David C. McCanles, he was neither horse thief nor "reb" border ruffian, as Nichols reported, but a man who had migrated two years earlier from North Carolina, where he had been sheriff of his county and an officer of the militia. He brought the first plow into what is now Jefferson County, Nebraska, and broke the first sod there. Refinement and urbanity were not outstanding characteristics of the pioneers, and McCanles does not seem to have been different in this respect. He is said to have used rough language, and was proud of his ability as a wrestler and liked to exhibit it.

McCanles had homesteaded two pieces of land along Rock Creek at the point where the old Oregon Trail crossed the stream. The crossing was difficult, and McCanles built and operated a toll bridge for a time. Then Russell, Majors, and Waddell, organizing their Overland Stage Company, negotiated with McCanles for the lease of one tract of land with its buildings, and later for its purchase on the installment plan. The place became the Rock Creek station of the stage company, and was placed in charge of Horace *Wellman* and his wife. The "Mrs. Waltman's cabin" of Nichols's version was close–but no cigar.

Hickok had been driving wagons for Russell, Majors, and Waddell in the southwest. In the fall of the previous

year he had engaged in an argument with a grizzly bear somewhere in the Raton mountains, after which the company sent him to their Rock Creek station in Nebraska to recuperate. He was assigned duties as assistant to the stock keeper, J. W. Brink, better known as "Dock."

On the afternoon of July 12, 1861, McCanles was shot and killed by Hickok at the Wellman house. Two of McCanles's neighbors, Gordon and Woods, also were killed. Exactly what caused the shooting is not clear from present evidence, and may probably never be explained to the complete satisfaction of an impartial judge.

McCanles is known to have been displeased over the stage company's failure to pay the installments due him. The payments evidently were supposed to be made through Wellman, on whom McCanles made demands for his money, but the company was in financial straits. One version has it that McCanles, on the day of the shooting, intended to get his money or put Wellman off the place. In his defense it is pointed out that the county was not organized at the time, and there were no authorities to whom he could appeal, in default of payment, to regain possession. Records show that title to the place remained in the McCanles family.

There seems to have been no eye-witness account of the shooting on record until 64 years later, the Nebraska Historical Society obtained a statement from McCanles's son, Monroe, 12 years old at the time. He said he went with his father to the house, where Mrs. Wellman met them at the door. When she asked what McCanles wanted of Wellman, the former answered, "I want to settle with him." Mrs. Wellman said that her husband would not come out, and McCanles, according to the son's statement, told her: "Send him or I'll come in and drag him out."

At this point, the statement continues, young Hickok appeared in the doorway.

"Jim, haven't we been friends all the time?" McCanles asked.

"Yes."

"Are we friends now?"

"Yes."

"Will you hand me a drink of water?"

McCanles received the water in a dipper—this being the kitchen door—and after drinking walked around to another door which opened into a front room. As he stepped across the threshold, Hickok fired with a rifle and killed him almost instantly.

Woods and Gordon, his neighbors, had accompanied McCanles only as far as the barn, but the sound of the shot brought them running to the house. Hickok came to the door with a revolver and fired twice at Woods, who ran around a corner. Gordon ran away from the house, and Hickok fired at and wounded him. Wellman, armed with a hoe, pursued Woods and struck him over the head. He also swung at young Monroe, who evaded him and made his escape.

This is the version contained in Monroe McCanles's statement, who concludes with the information that Gordon was tracked down by a hound that brought him to bay near the creek, and was fighting off the dog with a stick when someone in the Wellman-Hickok group killed him with a load of buckshot.

A cautious historian would point out that Monroe McCanles was not an impartial witness, and testimony given

after so many years is likely to be faulty. However, the position of the bodies as described by witnesses who arrived on the scene about two hours later would tend to bear out, generally, Monroe's account, and to support the contention that neither McCanles, Woods, nor Gordon was armed. The witnesses said that Woods's skull was broken with a blunt instrument.

Hickok, Wellman, and Brink, charged with murder, pleaded self-defense in a hearing before a justice of the peace, alleging they were attacked. The justice did not find the evidence sufficient to hold them to circuit court. There are many indications that the hearing was not of a type that would constitute anything resembling a thorough or competent inquiry, and evidence that the victims were unarmed is altogether too strong to make out much of a case of self-defense for Hickok and the others. One responsible writer thinks that Hickok's semi-invalid, or convalescent, state may have justified to some extent his fears of violence at McCanles's hands, even though the latter was unarmed.

The striking feature seems to be that nothing so far offers a sufficient explanation of what set all this off. Hickok, it is true, indicated throughout his life a nervous disposition toward shooting first and pausing later for questions whenever he was threatened, or thought he was being threatened. Even granting this, he would hardly have embarked on such a Roman holiday without more provocation than has been suggested by the pro-McCanles writers. If McCanles's quarrel was with Wellman, why did Hickok take it upon himself? Hickok, 24 at the time, had never killed a man before.

Lack of space forbids a detailed explanation of the conclusion, but it seems apparent that the shooting resulted, not from a quarrel between McCanles and Wellman, as most writers have assumed, but from something involving McCanles and Hickok himself. The conversation reported in Monroe McCanles's statement, if he remembered it correctly, points to this. If a man is your friend, you do not ask him about it in this manner.

There is a statement from a contemporary of the affair to the effect that McCanles, soon after Hickok's arrival at the station, had irritated the young man by hanging the name "Duck Bill" on him, evidently because of some peculiar conformation of Hickok's nose or mouth. The name, according to this informant, was understood by some as "Dutch Bill." It is an interesting sidelight that the murder warrant, now in Nebraska's state library along with the other documents in the case, and of which this writer has seen a photographic reproduction, names the defendants as "Dutch Bill, Dock, and Wellman, their other names being unknown." This may shed some light on a matter which has always mystified Hickok's biographers: how a name like "James Butler" ever got worked around to "Bill," wild or tame.

Another writer states, without citing his authority, that McCanles had roughed up Hickok a few times in the course of demonstrating his prowess as a wrestler. A man of Hickok's ego does not enjoy being roughed up, and if this happened it would doubtless have contributed to bad feeling between the two men.

Still other writers have operated on the principle of *cherchez la femme* and produced a woman in the case—one Kate Shull, sometimes misspelled

Shell. It was suggested that Hickok, after assignment to the Rock Creek station, began laying siege to Kate's heart, to which McCanles had previously enjoyed exclusive access. It has been asserted that McCanles warned Hickok away, under penalty of violence. These reports are unsupported by evidence; but it is well established that on the morning after the shooting, Kate Shull was whisked away on the stagecoach and thereafter dropped out of sight.

One of Hickok's more enterprising biographers, Frank J. Wilstach, located the woman in the case many years later, after a lengthy search, and confronted the reluctant Kate with the following question: "Were you in the cabin when McCanles was shot?"

It is regrettable, from the historian's point of view, that the lady saw fit to deny this. An admission that she had been concealed within, added to the other circumstances, would have provided a completely satisfactory motive for Hickok shooting McCanles when the latter tried to enter the cabin. Something of this nature is necessary to explain the otherwise senseless desperation which, apparently, caused Hickok to open fire on an unarmed man.

While a satisfactory explanation of the McCanles affair is still not to be had, at least the known facts reveal Nichols's fanciful tall tale for what it is. It even seems doubtful whether Nichols actually talked to Hickok at all. There is the year and a half which separated the supposed conversations and the publication of the article. And Nichols closes with a solemn affirmation that his account is precisely as it was told him by "William Hitchcock [sic]—called *Wild Bill, the Scout of the Plains*." Maybe Colonel Nichols was simply one of those unfortunate men who never get a name right.

Nichols's story contained so many manifest absurdities that following writers should have recognized them. The Buel account of Wild Bill's exploits was almost equally inaccurate, but sounded less preposterous. His version of the McCanles affair, in his *Heroes of the Plains* (1882), introduced a Captain Kingsbury who arrived on the scene soon after the fight and saw the bodies of the "ten desperadoes" strewn all about. Buel also cited conversations with a surgeon, Dr. Joshua Thorne, who patched up the wounded Hickok and got the whole story from him. Nobody has ever been able to locate either Captain Kingsbury or Dr. Thorne since Buel introduced them to his readers, but they lent a fine air of plausibility to the story, and it is hardly surprising that many succeeding writers accepted his supposed facts.

The result is that Nichols and Buel, with the able assistance of the others previously named, originated a large number of legends that have been repeated by later writers until they are now widely accepted as gospel, and attempting to scotch them is like trying to drown out prairie dogs. While you pour water down one hole, the animal sticks his head out another, 20 yards away.

Emerson Hough, who should have known better, repeated Nichols's version of the McCanles affair in his well-known book, *The Story of the Outlaw*, and declared it was "the greatest fight of one man against odds at close range that is mentioned in any history of any part of the world"—including, we assume, Horatio at the bridge. Writers are still trying to foist off the story on

editors who are now pretty tired of seeing it—though the *Saturday Evening Post*, in an unwary moment, bought it several years ago.

The McCanles fight is only one, even if the most epic, of the feats attributed to Wild Bill. There is, for example, his slaying of the Cheyenne chief, Black Kettle, in the Battle of the Washita. Hickok, who was chief of scouts under General W. H. Penrose at the time, sought out Black Kettle with his keen eye, fought his way toward him through showers of lances and arrows, and struck his bowie knife into the heart of the great sachem, suffering himself a lance wound on the hip.

This, briefly, is the story as a number of writers give it. There is one small difficulty: Wilstach dug General Sheridan's report on the battle out of the government archives, and it turns out that General Penrose, to whom Hickok was attached, was snowbound on the Canadian River at the time Custer's troops fought the Battle of the Washita. Custer himself could not say who killed Black Kettle.

The list of such Hickok legends could be extended by the dozen, if space permitted. Of them all, however, perhaps the most exasperating—to any Diogenes of Western literature who pines for the truth—concerns the number of his victims. Here the task of separating fact from fiction becomes, for most practical purposes, impossible.

Stanley's figure of more than a hundred victims, confined exclusively to the white race, hits an all-time high. Later writers, sometimes making a half-hearted attempt to keep a score sheet of the killings, seem to have agreed on a figure in the neighborhood of 85, sometimes including Indians and sometimes not.

Hough, for example, believed he could count up all Hickok's "known killings" and justify a tally of "at least sixty-two men" by the time he was 25 years old. Since Hough credited him with ten victims in the McCanles affair, this gave him one year to increase his score by 52, or an average of about one killing a week.

On such tally sheets as these, however, Hickok picks up 35 victims at one whack in the Battle of Pea Ridge, when he reportedly lay behind a log and coolly picked off that number of Confederates, including General McCullough. First it would be necessary to substantiate the story and the figure—a very difficult thing to do. Then, if the rules are going to allow the addition of enemies killed in battle, Wild Bill Hickok will have to give way to a large number of buck privates, sergeants, and assorted rank who have made his record look pretty pale in battles all the way from the Peloponnesian Wars down to the Second World War.

Even Hough, after concluding that "his tally of eighty-five men seems large, but in fair probability it is not large enough," admits later that when all "doubtful instances" are cut out, Hickok killed "between twenty and thirty men in personal combat." But this is still too high.

Much of Hickok's fame rests upon his service as marshal of Abilene, Kansas, but there is certain proof of only two men he killed during this time—and one of these was his own deputy whom he killed by mistake. There is good authority for two more killings in a saloon at Solomon, Kansas, and one in Ellsworth, Kansas. While marshal at Hays he killed five men. The

addition of Dave Tutt brings the total to ten victims (excluding the accidental shooting).

Beyond this total, plus those in the McCanles affair, other claims for Hickok's guns are based on stories of doubtful authenticity, very difficult either to prove or disprove—though some of his encounters during the war were of such a nature that they might be listed as duels. This meager list of killings, restricted to those for which there is unquestionable evidence, probably is not large enough; conservative writers have put the number at around 15. It is likely that some of the doubtful claims could be verified, and even that an acceptably accurate count of Hickok's victims could be arrived at by a person skilled in research methods, if he had sufficient means and unlimited time at his disposal. The professional writer who has neither is reduced to the frustrating task of guessing.

It should be mentioned that it is a serious mistake to conclude, as a few over-enthusiastic devotees of the debunking school have, that the Hickok story is pure hoax, that Hickok had only ordinary ability as a frontiersman and as a gunman, and was a cowardly poltroon whose victims never got an even break. This simply is not so. His services as a scout were highly valued by a number of generals, both in the Civil War and in the Indian campaigns. His courage was not of the finest type, but the task of pacifying such rugged towns as Abilene and Hays is not assumed by a coward. There are other names for Hickok. Finally, there are on record many eye-witness accounts of his marksmanship, thoroughly reliable and dependable, which establish beyond doubt that Hickok had remarkable talents in this department. But that is another subject.

Those who would rather see heroes whittled down than worshiped will find that much whittling remains to be done on Hickok before we start to scrape the bone of fact. It has been remarked that not only the gunmanship of the badmen, but nearly every aspect of their lives, has been a subject of exaggeration. An example of this is the persistent legend of a romance involving Wild Bill and Calamity Jane.

Hickok had been married only a few weeks before he was killed in Deadwood, and correspondence indicates a genuine affection for his wife, up to his last hours. A writer, however, reported that he died with his head on Calamity Jane's shoulder, murmuring, "My heart was yours from the first, oh, my love."

In the first place, it is absurd to think that Hickok, a notoriously fastidious man, could entertain tender feelings for any such dissolute, tobacco-chewing, odoriferous old rum-pot as Calamity Jane. Secondly, there is abundant circumstantial evidence that the relationship is pure myth. Finally, there is the testimony of Calamity Jane herself, always the first to admit and boast of her affairs. Her comment on the reported episode, when she was questioned some years after Hickok's death, was characteristically brief and to the point—with perhaps a suggestion of regret in it. Said Calamity Jane: "All blankety-blank lies!"

When the perpetrators of the frontier legends came to deal with love interest, they produced some of their most amusing passages. Literary styles in that Victorian era were exceedingly proper, entirely unsuited to accurate reporting of the unrefined customs prevailing in the wild and woolly West.

There was, for instance, the inescapable fact that Wild Bill Hickok, the noble and romantic hero of their stories, had once contracted an earthy alliance of a domestic nature with a half-caste Indian maiden, Mary Logan by name. Their relationship was not blessed by a parson, and it was a delicate task to explain this to the sensitive readers of the 19th century. The authors, nevertheless, found a way. As Wilstach reports it:

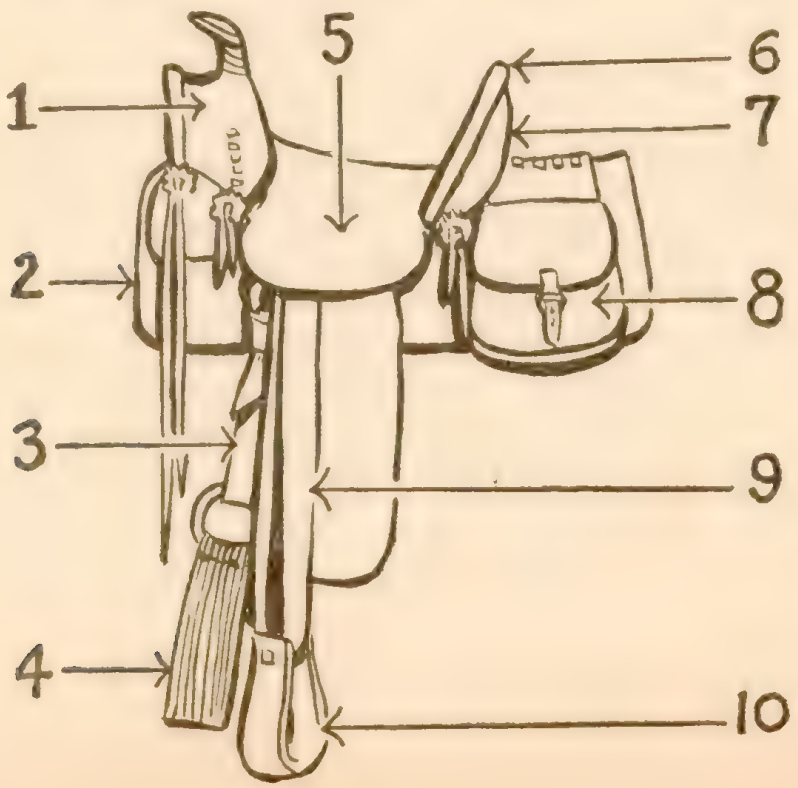
"Notwithstanding this remarkable intimacy, Bill always declared that he left the girl as he found her and that she would readily have sacrificed her life rather than forfeit the jewel of her chastity."

Many of the Hickok legends are difficult to remove from circulation, and may endure to the end of time, like stories of the ancient Greek heroes. But there is a limit to what people will believe.

BACK IN THE SADDLE

A Western Quiz

To THE GREAT MAJORITY of Americans, the Western stock saddle is something with which they are familiar only through reading about in stories. Here's a chance to test and, perhaps, increase your knowledge about it. Ten different parts of the saddle pictured below are numbered. It's up to you to name each part, then check your list with the correct one on page 142. Seven right passes you in this quiz; eight is good, nine is better—and a perfect score brands you as a saddle-wise Westerner!



Loaded

By FRANK BONHAM

HAVING MADE HIMSELF *a tidy fortune, Charlie Coleman's problem now is to get it out of Arizona Territory, past the malevolent watchfulness of Pete Shank, his former partner and present enemy. First publication anywhere.*

WHEN DAWN BROKE, Coleman halted his wagon on a gravelly ridge commanding his back trail. He made sure there was not another traveler, white or red, between him and the yonder hills before he lay down under his wagon to sleep. Then it was a hair-trigger sleep.

They had told Charlie Coleman and his erstwhile partner, Pete Shank, that they might make a fortune in Arizona Territory, but they would never get out with it. Coleman, 12 years after reaching the Territory, was attempting to disprove it.

He had made his fortune. Once, even Pete Shank, the wildcatter and ladies' man, the bluff and the energetic, had counted six figures in his passbook. But Tombstone, the mirage that had deceived fifteen thousand miners and their host of camp followers, had tricked him, too. He had left his fortune in a thousand-foot shaft when the mines filled with water. But Charlie Coleman got out because his money was in purveying to the miners in his Big Store on Toughnut Street.

Eight years the town had sent the iron chatter of her stamp mills up to the skies, the headlong laughter of her saloons out over the desert. But after another two years the place was a ghost camp of chloriders drunk on whisky and dreams. The wealth was drowned in the mines. The girls in

their net stockings and flounced skirts left approximately an hour after it was certain that the boom days were over.

Pete Shank still bunked in his suite at the New York House, sharing it with pack rats who traded *ocotillo* twigs for cigar butts. He cooked his own meals with food from Charlie Coleman's store, staring furtively, and hungrily, at the big wooden safe whenever he was in. The dissolution of their partnership when Shank decided to go into mining had been mutual; but now he had begun to say, only half humorously:

"You're a sharp trader, Charlie. You talked me out of my share of the ranch slicker'n hog-fat, didn't you?"

So now it was Pete Shank, rather than the Apaches and Yaqui raiders, whom Charlie Coleman was keeping a lookout for. . . .

When Coleman awoke he drowsed on one elbow while he gazed out over the stark, greasewood hills of southern Arizona. Haze choked the arroyos and the lean pockets of the hills. Seven o'clock, and already it was hitting 80. Charlie feared neither the heat nor the country, for he understood both. For six years he and Shank had ranched this area, raising cattle and hogs and planting maize, chili, and an occasional Apache.

The silver strike at Tombstone ended the partnership. It had not been too solid a thing from the beginning. The pact that had endured all the way from Missouri, thriving under the slashing attack of Indians, had wilted under the suns of boredom. While everyone else went crazy in the mines, Charlie Coleman still saw them as purveyors of hams and beeves to the miners. Shank's vision was of owning a mine, of wearing diamond studs and squiring the prettiest girl in town to the opera house in his own turnout. So Charlie bought him out, sold his ranch, finally, and concentrated on the Big Store.

He was a quiet man, and no one knew whether he was making money or not. He was open-handed, grubstaking everyone who came along, buying drinks for the house when he visited a saloon. But no one ever got a look into his safe or his ledger. Those were his own secrets.

Under the sun, Charlie harnessed his four mules to the light spring wagon, chewed a piece of hardtack, and drove on. He glanced back periodically. He was nervous and in a hurry, for though he had left at night, he knew Pete had been watching him for weeks.

The wagon lunged across an arroyo and hit out across a flat. Near here, he and Pete had once fought off six Cochise bucks. That old .40-.40 Henry of Pete's had had a lot to do with it. Load it Sunday and fire all week. And he could hammer a tack at a hundred feet, three shots out of five.

Charlie's spine rippled. In that wilderness of boulders off to the left, Shank might be pulling a bead right now, licking his forefinger for windage, taking range with that eye like a scratch awl.

Six times in the last month—by count—Pete Shank had said:

"Nothing to hold a rich feller like you in Tombstone, Charlie. Why don't you get out?"

As much as anything, it was a taunt. *Try and do it!* he was saying.

It was hard to recapture any of his old affection for Pete. The affability, the resiliency, had faded like smoke on the horizon. Hard times had smelted all the goodness out of him and left a small, black cinder of ill-nature and

greed. He would sit bitterly drinking whisky and thinking of the fortune he had had to abandon in his mine, and resenting the luck or foresight of men who had gotten off better.

Coleman nooned near Dragoon Spring, in a nest of boulders and runt pines. Some of the pressure was off. *If I make it through the pass,* he thought, *I'll know he started too late.*

He watered the mules. They were fine, strong young animals; by the time they arrived at El Paso, they would be gaunt and sore-eyed. The winds were in full fury on the desert. Through Texas Canyon, the slope was gentle, but the mules pulled strongly. For the crossing of the deserts, Coleman had dispensed with all but the necessities. A wooden water barrel sloshed at one side of the wagon; a tar bucket for doping the axles swung beneath.

The sun crested and slipped behind him, heating the faded blue shirt against his back. And now the tumbled boulders divulged a shallow valley ahead—Sulphur Springs Valley.

He thought, *Pete, you old son, I've showed you!*

He was in this sanguine frame of mind when one of the lead mules faltered, reared in the traces and went down kicking and making a startling amount of braying. Charlie stood up on the seat—and standing this way he saw the wound in the animal's shoulder. The report of the rifle came a moment later.

He had the sense to stand quietly. From a rounded gray cairn of rocks a horseman appeared. Pete Shank rode his horse down the rugged slope with a carbine in his hands and his pale eyes steadily on Charlie.

Charlie sat down. He was not a cowardly man, yet not one for heroics. The gun on the seat beside him might as well be four yards away. So he occupied himself with cramming tobacco into his pipe until Shank reached the wagon. The mule, shot in the heart, had ceased struggling.

Charlie glanced up. "That's a mighty fresh-looking hoss, Pete, to have come so far and so fast."

Shank was lean and brown and his eyes were pocketed deep under dark brows. "He ain't come so far," he said. "He's been staked out a few miles back for the last month. He's the third I've rode, Charlie."

Charlie slowly nodded. "Good planning, Pete. Better than you ever did when we were ranching." He looked at the Henry rifle in the other's hands, a short-barreled weapon with browned metal parts. "Same old car-been. And you can still handle it."

"She's a sweetheart," Shank said affectionately.

"About the only thing about you, Pete, that's still clean and shining, ain't she?"

Temper flared in Shank's face. "You dragooned me out of the ranch. You robbed me because you knew I had to have money quick to buy into my mine."

"It was your own price. Get to it, Pete. What do you want?"

Shank squinted along the rifle barrel. "Sure. I'll get to it. I've been doing some figuring. I figure you come out of the bust in pretty good shape. I figure some of it, say about two-thirds, ought to be mine."

His pale eyes came up quickly. Strange eyes which Coleman had never looked into quite so deep before. And he was afraid, for this man meant to kill him. All the talk was by way of

whipping up a resentment to spike his resolve.

"How do you figure that?" Charlie asked mildly.

Shank retorted in sudden temper, "I didn't follow you to haggle! Going to trot it out?"

"You're pretty sure I'm rich, ain't you?"

"I'd be blind if I wasn't. If I've seen you set up the house once, I've seen you do it a hundred times. Backslapping and yarning with every white-collar man in town. Driving the best turnout in Tombstone, wearing the best clothes, and pampering yourself like a king! You ain't had time to spend the kind of pile you were making since. I put my money on the card that says you've got a hundred thousand if you've got a dime."

Charlie Coleman waved a hand at the gear crammed into the back of the wagon. "This will surprise you, Pete. There's all I've got in the world. Except this—" He pulled a chamois bag out of his pocket, opened it, and poured a handful of gold coins onto his palm.

"Six hundred dollars. There's my fortune. Your cut, according to your figuring, would be four hundred. Want I should count it out?"

Shank said, "Start throwing gear out. Open everything."

Charlie shrugged. He stepped over the seat into the poorly packed litter. He opened first a black india-rubber bag. Shank was not satisfied with a cursory look, though it was obvious that no fortune in gold could be concealed in it. Shirts, socks, straight razor, and a bachelor's miscellanea tumbled out of it onto the ground. Shank's eyes grubbed through it. He had not removed Charlie's Colt, but this was the reverse of comforting. It meant that Shank's intention was not to let his ex-partner live long enough to use it.

Charlie continued to throw articles onto the ground. His mind persisted in measuring, scheming, weighing. In a surprising length of time, he was finished. The wagon was empty, but not a double-eagle had shown up. Coleman regarded the paltry scatter of his possessions, and saw there, suddenly, the key Shank needed to be certain of his surmise that there was more than $600 to be had here—

Shank's voice shot up: "Where is it? You damned old scheming catamount *—where is it?*"

Coleman slowly shook his head, smiling. "You already named it, Pete. Didn't you know you had the answer? You said you'd seen me set up the house a hundred times. You bragged on my clothes and my buggies. Those things take money. Having a lot of friends is expensive business. But they're the best investment in the world, because nobody can steal them from you."

He said with a touch of wistfulness, "Those friends of mine, Pete—Pres Ramsey, Joe Ticknor, Scotty—they were my fortune. And if I ever need a hundred dollars and can get word to one of them, I know I'll be good for it. You knew them as well as I did. You should know that you don't pard around with men like that, champagne drinkers and diamond-stud wearers, with nickels and dimes. They're my annuities, my gold pieces, and my gilt-edge bonds. But they were worth the price they cost me. Even," he said, "if knowing them meant my winding up with no more goods than I could get into a spring wagon."

Charlie had driven a small thistle of doubt into Shank's hide. The lank features pulled into insecure lines. The gray eyes again quested dubiously through the gear. Then they flashed up as if to test Charlie's sincerity, as a man might test a gold piece by biting down on it.

Gently, Charlie said, "They were great times, Pete. Remember Pres Ramsey's party at the Bird Cage? When he got so drunk he fell out of his box? But they're over and done and now all we've got is a lot of receipted bills and some memories they can't take away from us."

The fire in Shank's eyes sank into embers. The story Coleman had recited was the story of nearly every man in Tombstone. They lived up to their income, and when there ceased to be any income, they had only their clothes. Pete Shank moved the barrel of the gun.

"I'll split the six with you. Throw three hundred on the ground."

One by one, Charlie tossed 15 double-eagles onto the soft, pebbly earth. Then he turned and painstakingly repacked the wagon. Shank remounted, but kept an eye on him, as if any moment a corner might be torn from a secret wrapping to expose a brick of gleaming gold. It was then necessary to cut the dead mule out of the traces. The merchant tied the other animal of the lead team behind the wagon. He returned to the seat. This was the moment he dreaded. He waved a hand at Shank.

"So long, Pete. Better make it last. And no hard feelings."

Shank did not reply. Frowning, he was watching the two mules go into the collars and with difficulty move the iron tires out of the ruts they had made in the loose earth. The wheels ground forward grudgingly.

"What's a-matter with them mules of yours? Can't they pull a spring wagon and a canch of gear? You'd reckon they was pulling a load."

"They're tired," Charlie said. But on Shank's face he saw realization spreading like a brilliant red dawn; and now he threw himself forward over the dashboard to the ground, and when he rolled over his Colt was in his hand. He heard the stinging crack of Pete Shank's Henry, felt the gritty bite of gravel on his face.

He took time to make his shot good. Shank was spurring away, wanting distance, wanting a long-range battle so that his carbine would geld Charlie's Colt. But the storekeeper, astonishingly steady, let his shot go only when he was ready. It took Shank in the middle of the back, at the base of his neck, and he went forward against the saddle-swell and then slowly rolled out of the saddle.

Charlie Coleman camped a mile farther, after burying his ex-partner. The mules needed rest. He would have to replace the lost one. They were, after all, hauling a load of two hundred pounds of gold coin and three hundred pounds of silver. Nearly a hundred thousand dollars.

Friends were much to Coleman, but so was this money he had worked so long and so hard to earn. The friends were scattered, but the money reposed, layer upon layer, round upon round, under the false bed of the wagon, a flat, a shining, and a still-safe treasure.

He had made liars out of them all. He had made his fortune, and he was taking it home to an easier country to spend it.

By BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR

BUCK RIPLEY'S SLIDE

JACK MILLER *learns just why Buck Ripley stampeded all those longhorns to their certain death—at least, he thinks so until he hears what his own partner has to say about it all. This story was first published in* Adventure *a couple of decades back.*

FOUR MEN rode abreast in the thin, hot air of a summer afternoon, behind a score of loose horses, two of which carried packs. The Canada line lay 40 miles behind them, and off to the south the Big Bend of Milk River formed a great half circle, a giant curve gouged deep in the broad level of the plains. These riders had come a long way since morning, across a flat, well-grassed country that would have been a Paradise save that it lacked water. As it was, one horse wrangler had remarked plaintively that a jack rabbit could hardly cross that region without a filled canteen. Yet the range had a fair sprinkling of stock, grazing in scattered bunches.

"We'll make the river in a couple of hours, by the looks," one remarked, "but, oh me, oh my, I'd give two big, round silver dollars right now for a quart of cold water."

The rider addressed smiled and pointed west. "About a mile an' a half over there," said he, "is a creek comin' down from the north. Lots of water. Few trees in the bottom. Good place to camp, if you want to turn aside, Jack."

"Why in blazes didn't you say so before?" the first asked. "You mean to say we been parallelin' water right along?"

The other nodded.

"Here I been all set to perish of thirst," the first mourned, "when I coulda been livin' in hope. Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask me, Jack. You said we better pull straight for Milk River."

Jack Miller spoke to one of the horse wranglers. He turned the small herd off at right angles, so that they headed straight for the indicated creek. They dropped into a shallow draw, crossed

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a mile of prairie as flat as a billiard table, pale yellow instead of green-covered, the bleached yellow of ripe buffalo grass. And suddenly they came to the brink of a deep crevasse, a huge, flat-bottomed trough with straight earthen walls, coming from somewhere in that northern flatness, bearing south to a junction with Milk River. From the rim sparkled water in a channel bordered by wild-rose thickets, patches of berry brush, occasional solitary cottonwood trees of vast girth and gnarly limbs that made a pleasant shade for man or beast.

They had to hunt for a place to get down, so steep was the eastern bank. Once in the bottom, they made for the creek.

"Let's camp," Miller said. "Let's call it a day. I ain't seen as good a lookin' spot as this in a week's travel."

His partner nodded. They had lain on their bellies to drink out of that clear, cool stream. The loose horses stood knee-deep, dipping their muzzles. They led the pack animals under a cottonwood, took off their gear, unsaddled, stretched themselves in the shade to smoke.

"You never told me you knew this country, Buck," Miller said after a time. "But you do know it too well not to have been over it before."

His partner did not answer for a minute. He was tall, sparely built, a soft-speaking man with mild blue eyes. The only striking feature about him was his nose. It stood out prominently, with a bold Roman curve, a veritable beak. He looked away up the canyon. Canyons are peculiar to mountain ranges, but this was a canyon slashed through the heart of the plains. Glacial, eroded by water, however it happened, there it was—a boxlike gorge. They had come slipping and scrambling to the bottom. Farther above it was sheer wall.

As George Buchanan stared up that deep cleft the nostrils of his thin, curved beak seemed to dilate. For a second he looked almost fierce, as if memory stirred passion and resentment.

"Yes," he said. "I know this country, Jack. Or did once. Long time ago."

Miller looked curious, but he said nothing. He had been a partner in the horse business with George Buchanan for nine years. He knew most of Buck's little peculiarities. He had learned them during a period when he and Buck built up a sizable horse outfit in Eastern Oregon, built it up together out of nothing. He knew Buchanan hailed originally from Texas. Otherwise his personal history was a blank. Buck never had talked much to his partner about what he did and where he ranged before Miller met him in the lava-rock country. Miller didn't know that Buck had ever been in Montana until he admitted it now. Yet they had crossed the state diagonally to deliver

300 horses to a buyer on the Canadian side.

They were trailing home now. Twice in the last 24 hours Buck had betrayed an intimate knowledge of local topography. But Miller didn't ask any more questions. Buck would talk if he chose, not otherwise.

They lay in the shade of the cottonwood for an hour. The two horse wranglers sprawled on the ground. Miller and Buchanan leaned their backs against the rough bark. Their horses grazed, content with grass and good water.

This north-Montana country impressed Miller. It was more to his taste than the lava rock of eastern Oregon. Also, it was 500 miles nearer a potential market. Western Canada was settling up. Farmers needed teams. It seemed incredible that such a creek as this, for instance, wasn't held as a ranch location. Miller kept looking about. And one of his casual glances fell on something far up the creek bottom. He hadn't noticed it before.

"Might be a ranch up there," said he to Buck. "Think I see a fence. Want to ride up a ways with me?"

Buck shook his head. Miller, a preternaturally energetic man, gave way to an impulse of restlessness and curiosity. The country interested him, with its rich carpet of grass, its tremendous unoccupied stretches. He wondered whether anyone did live beyond that next bend.

They had three horses on picket. He saddled one and rode up the creek. The steep walls of the gorge closed in, became if possible higher and straighter, great brown earth cliffs. The bottom was flat. The creek channel wound like a sluggish snake.

Half a mile farther the nature of the creek bed altered. Instead of the hardpan and gravel over which the water flowed by their camp, the stream here ran over soft, whitish clay. The channel proper was a narrowing trough, ten or twelve feet below the surface of the flats.

The fence Miller found to be a barrier of poplar poles from earth wall on one side to earth wall on the other. He found a set of bars and passed through. Some ranchman's home pasture, he supposed, with those steep banks for the east and west fenceline.

Yet no ranch house greeted him around that bend, or the next; only a few loose horses bearing a curiously formed H on their left hips. The bottom lay in shadow now, though the sun still had two hours to go. It was cool in that cleft. Miller whistled *Sam Bass*, and *Sandy Land*. A rich earthy smell rose from the black soil. Grass swept his stirrups.

Then he came upon something that made him draw rein and stare and ponder. For a hundred feet up and down the bed of the creek, overlaid by the sluggish current, was littered—nay solidly floored—with bones! A white carpet of bones. The bank on both sides was covered with them, so that the grass grew in tufts between. And on the edge of the flat, like a cairn, stood a mound of skulls ten feet high, twenty feet in diameter. Skulls of longhorn steers, the Texas longhorn that spanned four and five feet between tip and tip. The skulls were bleached, but in that dry air, 3,000-odd feet above sea level, the horns remained on the pith. Some even retained a bit of their ancient gloss. The pile was like an immense porcupine, curved four-foot quills sticking out at every angle. It was as if a bovine massacre had oc-

curred some time in the past. There were hundreds of bleached skulls in that pile. Miller knew the litter of bones that whitened the creek bed must be the disarticulated skeletons of all these cattle.

He sat wondering about that. He stared into the creek bed, raised his eyes to scan the bank towering above. A notch of a ravine cut the high wall. From the flat where the skull mound stood a sharp slope dipped to the water. All else was straight up and down. Miller saw that the place of skeletons was on the only spot anywhere near where four-footed beasts could come down from the plains above, cross the creek to the flat on which he stood—for at least two miles by the way he had come.

He rode on at last, thinking about that graveyard of longhorn cattle, wondering whether the place was perhaps a boggy trap at certain seasons, and whether some rancher had fenced it off for protection. He decided that this must be so when he had gone another mile or two. He was about to turn back when he marked another line of fence across the canyon.

He rode up to that. Above it a little way the creek bottom began to widen, the straight banks to become more sloping. And out where the gorge ceased to be a gorge and became more like the natural banks of a plains stream, Miller saw buildings by the creek and smoke streaming blue above one roof.

Miller went through the fence, rode straight for the ranch. Not because he craved company, or because he desired exercise. He had already ridden three times as far as he intended. But he was tremendously curious about how all those mature cattle perished in one spot, and who piled all those skulls in a beehive mound, and why. It is the nature of all men to be curious about strange things that stir the imagination. Where smoke blew people lived. And whoever lived there would know.

The buildings comprised a typical combined cookhouse and bunkhouse, a stable, a set of round corrals, the remnant of a stack of hay against one stable end. It was all built of poplar poles, dirt-roofed. And it had been built a long time, Miller could see. A sort of crude porch slanted over the house door. Before this stood a saddle horse. And as Miller rode up a man came out and mounted. He was dressed in the ordinary garments of a range man. He nodded to Miller, looked at him more or less indifferently, and rode away, down across the gut of white mud, and up the steep bank on the east side.

Miller sat his horse like a man dumbfounded. For this man's face under a worn Stetson was practically the face of his partner, George Buchanan. The same mild blue eyes, separated by that high, thin, curving, predatory beak of a nose. They might have been twins.

Another man appeared in the doorway. "'Lo, stranger," said he. "Better light an' tarry awhile. Put your horse in the stable."

"Got a camp down the creek a ways," Miller found voice to answer. "I'll tarry a spell, though."

His host was elderly, if not old. Probably not less than 60 possibly more, but with no sign of age in speech or action. Miller followed him into a room 16 by 20 or more, bare except for bunks and a few rough chairs. A fire burned in a big kitchen stove. There was a smell of frying bacon.

"Just fixin' me a snack," the ranchman said. "Pull up a chair."

"Let not so long since," Miller replied. "I'll join you in a cup of coffee, though."

He sat across the table and watched the old fellow eat. Miller decided that this was no common ranchero. There was an air about him, a note of command in his voice. He wore good clothes, of almost modish cut for the heart of the cow country. There was something indefinitely familiar about him that puzzled Miller. They faced each other across the table. The old man had a plate of fried potatoes and bacon. He lifted his coffee cup genially.

"Here's how, stranger," he said, "for lack of somethin' stronger."

"I come up through this here canyon below," Miller said after an interval. "I see a regular cows' graveyard one place. Made me kinda curious."

The old man looked up from his plate. "Yeah," he nodded, "graveyard it is. We fenced it off years ago."

He finished his food. The sun struck through a window and laid a slanting beam on the white oilcloth of the table. Miller's horse dozed on three legs at the door. A cool breeze fluttered gently through the room. The blistering plains heat had spent itself, and relief from that brassy glare was welcome alike to man and beast. The old man leaned back in his chair and produced a cigar case, thrust it at Miller.

"Don't mind if I do."

They lighted up. Miller relished a clear Havana. They blew smoke rings in silence.

"So you wondered about that pile o' bones, eh?" The old fellow came abruptly to what was still lurking in Miller's mind. "You're a stranger in these parts, eh?"

"Horse outfit in Eastern Oregon," Miller replied, "on our way home after deliverin' a bunch we sold to a Canadian near Willow Springs. Yes, sir. That boneyard made me plumb curious. Musta heap of stock died there."

"Nigh a thousand head. An' they didn't die. They were killed. Them bones is a monument. They call that crossin' Buck Ripley's Slide."

Miller crossed his knees and waited. The old man stared out the window, as if his attention had been suddenly fixed by a pair of houseflies buzzing in a sunbeam.

"I moved the Ragged H from Texas to Montana eleven years ago," he said at last. "Got crowded outa the South. Had about nine thousand head in three herds. It costs money to transfer that much stock over two thousand miles, stranger. One way an' another, time I got them herds north of the Platte I owed a lot of money, an' had darned little cash to go on. We wintered in Southern Wyoming, pulled on early next spring. We crossed the Missouri at Wolf Point. I'd scouted this country a little the year before an' it looked good. So we located a headquarters on Poplar about thirty-five miles east of here. If you ever pass through this way again stop in an' you'll see a real cow ranch. But eleven years ago she was just a bunkhouse an' some corrals in a howlin' wilderness, with three thousand none too tame Sioux Injuns to the south of us on the old Fort Peck reservation. Lookin' back, it seems to me some of us old-timers had more nerve than judgment.

"As I said, I owed a heap of money to the banks. I needed to sell considerable beef that fall to reduce these here liabilities somewhat an' have cash to carry me over to another season. So come August, an' the Chicago market on the rise, we gather a herd of steers.

All the Ragged H stuff is rangin' close, an' mostly east of Poplar, so it don't take us long to bunch about two thousand prime beef. This Northern buffalo grass puts real meat on a longhorn's bones.

"Them days there's only one railroad crossin' the sovereign state of Montana. That's the Northern Pacific—she's just completed for transcontinental traffic. The main line's south of the Yellowstone. We have three hundred an' fifty miles to go an' two big rivers to cross. So we're trailin' this herd toward the Wolf Point crossin' of the Missouri on the first part of the drive.

"We don't know this white-mud country. We'd only got into this part of the state that spring, recollect. Anyway we're grazin' south an' west an' we draw up to this here White Mud Creek."

The old man inspected critically the accumulated ash on the end of his cigar.

"We didn't know the White Mud—but we learned about her. Yes, we learned about her, all right," he said and fell silent, for so long that Miller prompted him, fearing that his host meant to stare at the kitchen floor indefinitely.

In that silence the buzz of the houseflies was like the muted whining of saws. The sun was almost gone now from the creek bottom. Away off on the bench a coyote, prowling early, yapped and let his yapping trail off into a howl.

"You had some sort of mixup here, I expect," Miller suggested.

"That there pile uh bones you seen," the old man continued, "cost me thirty thousand dollars."

"You don't say," Miller commented. "That's a lot of money, even if you say it quick."

The old man smiled. He reached over to drop his cigar ash in the stove. "Yes, sir. An' I owed seventy or eighty thousand on top of that."

"Cowmen an' bankers gamble with cattle an' weather," Miller observed, "just like a cowpuncher does with cards an' dice."

The old man nodded agreement. He rose to spit in the firebox. When he sat down again he looked at Miller and said:

"I had two boys in my outfit that I hand-raised. You notice that feller that rode away as you come up? He's the youngest—Tom Ripley. He's range boss for the Ragged H now. Pretty good man. But he wasn't much account them days. Feather-brained. Wild as a hawk. I kept him goin' mostly on account of his brother. Buck was smart an' steady. Old head on young shoulders. He had a bad temper an' a kinda mean streak too, but he never showed it. Buck was plumb reliable. I depended on him a lot. He bossed one uh these herds for me clear from the Panhandle, an' he wan't scarcely turned twenty then. I commanded this beef roundup in person, but Buck was segundo—his say-so as good as mine.

"To make a long story short we have this beef herd strung out to cross the White Mud below here, first place that looked like a feasible crossin'. We point the lead down a notch an' let 'em take their time, figurin' they'd find the best way to cross that boggy creek in that narrow gut themselves.

"Buck rode on ahead of the herd when we was a mile or two back. I didn't think nothin' of that at the time. There was plenty of riders to handle 'em.

"Well, them two thousand-odd fat,

snuffy longhorns was strung out three quarters of a mile. The lead was well into the creek bottom, some of 'em watered an' up on the flats. This ravine that led down was full of 'em an' the drag was still on the east bench shovin' up, for they could smell water. Me an' another feller pulled up to watch 'em string down that deep coulee.

"An' while we set there Buck comes scramblin' up the bank on one side uh the herd. He pulls up forty-fifty yards from us. I was lookin' at him. He set there with his head kinda droopin' for a minute or two. I see him straighten up with a kind of start an' look around. He reaches behind him an' unties the long yaller slicker every one of us carries on his saddle.

"Then he drives the spurs into his horse, waves this slicker over his head, an' with a yell like a Comanche charges right into the middle of the herd.

"You know what longhorn steers are. They're wilder'n antelope. They go crazy when they're scared. They jump at their own shadow. When they run all hell can't stop 'em till they've run themselves out. That there herd parted in the middle like a snake you'd run a wagon wheel over. Them behind Buck rolled back like the wash from a steamer. Them ahead plunged down that narrow ravine. The noise of 'em, horns clackin' an' hoofs poundin' was like thunder. It shook the earth.

"I yelled to the boys to take care of that part of the herd that was stampedin' back on the bench an' I galloped over to the rim to look down. I knew there was goin' to be a hell of a mixup down there. An' it was hell, stranger. I never seen nothin' quite so bad before, an' hope never to again. You see, this ravine they followed down led into the creek like a chute into a coalbin. They couldn't walk straight across that boggy channel an' up the other side. They had to go into the water, foller downstream about fifty yards an' then turn up the right-hand bank. The channel banks was ten or twelve foot high on each side.

"Well, sir, when that stampede started from behind, the leaders tried to run in that bog. Of course they couldn't. Some of 'em went down. The rest poured in on 'em in blind panic. That boggy channel was full of cattle when I got to look down. The rest piled in, piled in, like water pourin' over a mountain falls. Nothin' on earth could stop 'em. Nothin' did stop' em. They surged into that hole, plungin', bellerin', till it was level full. Level full. A bridge of flesh an' blood an' bone. An' the remnant of nigh a thousand head of prime steers floundered an' plunged across to solid ground on the west side over that solid mass of bogged an' smothered, dead an' dyin' cattle."

The old man shook his head. "I never seen nothin' like it," he said solemnly. "No sir! An' whilst I sat there dumbfounded, Buck come ridin' back to stop beside me an' look down. He looks like he's seein' a ghost or a murder or somethin', but he don't say a word. He just looks.

"I can't say anythin' myself for a minute. I feel like—well I don't know as I can describe how I feel. An' when I do get my tongue all I can say is, 'I'd ought to have the boys hang you to a cottonwood limb—you—'

"I'm frothin' at the mouth by this time. I can't think straight. I don't even wonder why he did that lunatic thing. All I can see is' them dead an' crippled cattle. I can see 'em wallerin' on the edges of this mess, with broken legs, and horns cracked off an' the

stumps bleedin', an' the cripples was bawlin' low an' mournful.

"An' Buck he still don't say a word. He looks down for a second or two more. Then he turns his horse away an' points straight across country for the home ranch—an' I never lay eyes on him again."

The old man chucked the butt of his cigar into the stove and frowned at the floor.

"It was a hell of a thing to see, I can tell you," he murmured. "That's how come that pile uh bones you seen. Some of the boys camped on roundup piled all them skulls together one day a couple of years after. They still call that place Buck Ripley's Slide—yeah, I told you that before."

"But what in blazes did he do it for?"

"Ah," the old cattleman grunted. "That's the point. I didn't have sense enough to know that boy would sure have a reason. I just didn't give him a chance. But I found out, darned soon—yes."

He walked over to a window. "She's cloudin' up in the east," he remarked. "Looks pretty black. Maybe one of them hell-tearin' thundershowers we get in these parts. Better put up your horse, stranger."

"Oh, I gotta amble back to my own camp," Miller replied. "A thundershower won't hurt me none. What made this here Buck Ripley stampede the herd?"

The old cattleman sat down again, and passed another cigar to Miller.

"This here ranch," said he, with apparent irrelevance, "where we're settin' now—my outfit owns it an' uses it as a line camp in winter—had been built a year or two before we come into the country. Feller had about three hundred cattle. Was holdin' 'em all in this here gorge below. Good pasture on them flats. Well, of course, Buck didn't get no chance to explain. I damned him so hot an' heavy, I guess he just got his back up—an' I told you he had a temper an' a mean streak in him.

"But you recollect I told you he rode on ahead. Well, he went through these creek bottoms. He didn't speak with this here nester but the feller told us after he saw Buck ridin' through his cattle. An' Buck was smart enough to see what was wrong. This here little rancher's herd was rotten with hoof-an'-mouth disease. You *sabe* that, I suppose?"

Miller nodded. Foot-and-mouth disease affects cattle, sheep, deer—anything with a cloven hoof. Wherever it breaks out in a herd that herd is doomed. It is deadly in its nature and it spreads by contagion and infection. The only successful method of fighting it is to exterminate every hoofed beast within the scope of possible infection, and isolate the territory where they have grazed till the bacillus dies out on the grazing-grounds.

"In fact, the Stock Association was sendin' men down from Fort Benton to shoot every hoof he owned, to stop the darned thing spreadin'.

"An' Buck of course had seen this foot-an'-mouth disease work in the South. I reckoned that he figured to turn back as much of the herd as he could, because he knew every hoof that went down into them infected bottoms was a total loss.

"He was right, too. Every Ragged H steer that crossed the White Mud alive we had to shoot. We was there three days killin' cripples, fencin' off the creek so nothin' more could graze across that infected ground. The rest

of the herd we took 'way round, trailed south to Miles City, an' shipped—just about half the original two thousand. But I never laid eyes on Buck from that day."

"He done you a good turn, after all," Miller commented.

"A good turn?" the old cowman echoed. "Stranger, he saved my bacon. If I had lost all that herd, it woulda broke me. The banks woulda shut down on me, sold me out. I owed a lot of money. As it was, the remnant of that herd give me some cash. I carried over to the next season, nip an' tuck. Two years squared me with the world. I've done well ever since. Yes, I owe that boy somethin'. The Ragged H is a cow outfit these days. Buck shoulda been in on it."

"I suppose you tried to get track of him?" Miller said.

"Sure I tried. It was like the ground had swallered him. An' he was a man you didn't overlook," the old fellow said. "Tall, with a high hooked nose—face like a eagle. Yes, I'd give Buck a good start in the cow business for himself if I could locate him. Every time I see that pile of skulls on the creek I think of Buck."

Miller sat digesting this.

"But since Buck faded outa the picture," his host continued—a little sadly, Miller thought—"I took hold of his brother, young Tom. He'd never been much account. Buck used to nurse him along, but they was always havin' trouble. Tom was darned unreliable. But somehow when I put it up to him it sorta made a man of him. He's run the Ragged H roundup for me seven seasons now. But he ain't Buck Ripley an' he never will be. A feller should never light on a man roughshod, stranger—not till you know just why he done whatever he does do, no matter how crazy it may look to you."

Miller nodded agreement. "You know," he said tentatively, "there's a feller in the Bellefleur country south of where I range, that resembles your description of Buck Ripley. I noticed this Tom Ripley as he rode off. He reminded me of this feller. I might come across him when I get back home."

The old man looked eager. "You look up that feller," he said. "Let me know. You can address me at Glasgow, Vale County, Montana. Ripley's my name, too. Ben Ripley."

Miller stared at him. "Yes," the cattleman nodded. "Buck was my son. I thought a heap of that boy."

Miller glanced out the window. The clouds, big thunderheads, were massing darkly. "She looks like she might bust loose," said he. "I guess I'll mosey back to camp."

He saw something besides the gathering storm. The Ragged H roundup was pulling in on the flats above the ranch, chuck and bed wagons, with a fan-shaped tail of loose saddle horses. Their beef herd would be trailing across the bench.

"I'll let you know whether this party I mentioned happens to be your missin' Buck," Miller offered, as he reached for his stirrup.

"I'll be a heap obliged," Ripley answered. "Stop in at the home ranch if you come down this way with horses another season. So long."

Miller drew rein in the gathering dusk to stare at that pile of skulls for a second, that monument to the Buck Ripley who had vanished into space. Then he jogged along to his own camp. Buck—it was funny, Miller reflected, that the name Buck seemed to go nat-

urally with George Buchanan.

Buck and the horse wranglers were eating supper. A fire glowed at the base of the big cottonwood tree, the blaze sheltered from the first drops of rain by a stretched tent fly. Miller staked out his horse and filled his plate. They smoked in silence afterward. The thunderstorm passed with gusty squalls of rain, a few thunder peals. Then the clouds scattered and the stars came out to speckle a clear sky with points of fire. The two wranglers made down their beds and turned in. Buchanan and Miller sat staring into the bed of coals.

"I seen a place they call Buck Ripley's Slide, up the creek a ways," Miller said abruptly. "And I come across the old feller that owns the Ragged H at a ranch the upper end of this canyon. We talked quite a spell."

"Yeah?" Buchanan grunted.

"I seen a feller looks like your twin, too," Miller continued. "He's range boss of the Ragged H, the old man told me—feller name uh Tom Ripley."

Buck stared into the dying coals for a minute, then looked squarely at his partner. "What did old Ben tell you?"

Miller rolled a fresh cigarette and repeated the story.

Buck listened to the end without comment. The fire sank to a dull ruby spot in the dark. And he said nothing for some time. It was quite dark and very still in that canyon bottom. Buck sat humming a little tune to himself—*The Forty-nine Bottles A-hangin' on the Wall*, which every stockhand between Texas and Canada has chanted to wild steers bedded in the dark.

"Well," he said at last, "it never rains but it pours, seems like. Let's go to bed, Jack."

Stretched in their blankets side by side, Miller became aware of his partner's shaking with suppressed laughter.

"What the dickens ails you now?"

"Just thinkin'," Buck replied, "about this hoof-an'-mouth disease. You know there used to be a josh around the Ragged H about that an' my esteemed younger brother. He never was much of a rider—in fact, as the old man told you, he never was much account nohow. His horse used to buck him off an' get away from him. Then he'd hoof it into camp an' shoot off his mouth—an' one day the old man remarked that was the origin of the disease. An' now Tom's range boss of the Ragged H, eh?"

"Which you was an' shoulda been," Miller observed. "You'd oughta go up an' see the old man. He'd be tickled to death."

"Would you like to have me quit you as a partner in the horse business?"

"Hell, no, of course not," Miller replied. "But—"

"That's just what the old man would want," Buck murmured. "An' Tom's nose would be outa joint. If he has made Tom man enough to boss the outfit, 'tain't for me to show up at this late day an' cut the ground from under his feet. Buck Ripley's Slide, eh?"

He lay silent for a minute. Then he began to shake again with that strange suppressed laughter.

"What's the joke, darn you?" Miller demanded.

Buck paid no attention for a time. Then he whispered, "Say, Jack."

"Yeah."

"I don't know whether the joke is on me or the old man."

"What do you mean?" Miller asked.

"I didn't know nothin' about that nester's cattle bein' rotten with the hoof-an'-mouth disease."

Miller digested this. "Then what the devil made you stampede that herd thataway?" he inquired.

"I don't know," Buck confessed. "I never could figure it out nohow. Only this way. On that roundup, in fact all that summer, it had been up to me. Tom worried me. The old man worried me. I was everlastin'ly on the go. That day I was near wore out—just about dead for sleep. I'd nap on my saddle if I pulled up for a minute. Remember he told you about me ridin' ahead of the herd down into White Mud? Well, I did. I remember lookin' at that place they had to cross an' thinkin' that if they piled in too fast there would be merry hell in that boggy crossin'. Then I rode up on the rim an' set still to watch 'em string down.

"I musta dozed off. I recollect some crazy impulse to head that herd off from somethin' or other. Then I found myself ridin' like hell, whoopin' an' wavin' my slicker in their faces. The minute I come alive I knew that part of the herd that piled into the creek was thunderin' down to destruction. So when the old man began to squawk, I hadn't nothin' to say. I just rode off an' kept ridin'."

"Well, for Gawd's sake!" Miller breathed.

"I couldn't tell the old man that," Buck continued thoughtfully. "I'm darned glad I done him a good turn—but it ain't no credit to me. Maybe—sometime. Tom's deliverin' the goods. Buck Ripley's dead. That pile of skulls is his monument. Eh?"

"Amen," said Miller. "He was a good man, if he did go wrong once!"

MAVERICKS

As ALL ZGWM readers know, mavericks are unbranded cattle that roam the Western ranges. The origin of the term "maverick" goes back more than a hundred years, to the time when a wealthy Texan named Samuel Maverick owned more than two million acres of land in the southwestern part of the United States. During his heyday, Maverick loaned considerable money to neighboring ranchers, and he frequently accepted cattle in payment of these debts. As he never bothered placing his brand on the offspring of such cattle, there gradually appeared on the range a large number of unbranded stock. These were referred to as "Maverick's cattle." The name stuck, even after the great rancher passed on, and to this day unbranded cattle are "mavericks."

—GENE HAMMOND

Answers to "Back in the Saddle" Quiz

(See Page 126)

1. Pommel
2. Bastos (skirts)
3. Latigo
4. Cinch
5. Saddle tree
6. Roll (of cantle)
7. Cantle
8. Saddlebag
9. Stirrup leather
10. Stirrup

A Zane Grey Western Award Story

EPITAPH for a Boomtown Marshal

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

MANY THINGS about Fort Sand are changing—but not Marshal Jack Dall. He knows only one kind of law: picking right from wrong and backing right with all the force and judgment he has. Showdown finds him a man alone, forsaken by his friends, misunderstood by his wife—Jack Dall does his job as he sees it. This powerful story of a man's devotion to duty at the cost of personal pride, the respect of friends, and the comfort of the woman he worships has earned its author a Zane Grey Western Award.

THE MAN in overalls could run like a rabbit. He was shifty on his feet and fast as hell, but he was a sitting duck, just the same. Like the shot Jack Dall had put through his hat inside the Pioneer bar when the fellow had loudly claimed the marshal of Fort Sand was a saloon marshal, Dall's shots here in the open of the street were precisely planted. A warning, a chastisement, stinging the man's heels, driving him to a more frantic retreat. There was only one way to rule a tur-

bulent town.

Leaning indolently and unsteadily against an awning support before the Pioneer, Dall punched spent brass from his guns and reloaded with a smooth swiftness no amount of whisky could dull. Straightening, he smelled coal smoke on the air and he looked down the street. The bi-weekly train was at the station.

Dall stiffened. This was the hell of change; a man didn't get used to it in a hurry. He didn't get used to having a railroad serving his town. It took time. First they were just building the rails and all hell was popping on his street, keeping him busy twenty hours out of the day. Then it was suddenly over with; the town wasn't a construction camp any more; it was something else. And like everything else, the law had to change with the town or be left behind.

Dall thought this idea was funny, standing in front of the Pioneer, and he laughed—he had more of a skinful than he had thought. His kind of law never changed. His law was a matter of picking right from wrong and backing right with what force and judgment he possessed. He was Jack Dall and he had been the law in Fort Sand through its ruddiest days. He wasn't being left behind. It was just that a lot of the town thought he was. He was thirty years old and nothing could outdate a man as young as that as long as he held onto his guns.

He looked at the train again. It troubled him, though he could not remember why. He supposed he was a little drunk. Emil Peterson, boss of the Block, claimed a man thought best when he was drunk. It was often easier to believe what Peterson claimed than to argue with the man, particularly when there were other problems to face. And a troubled life was easier when a man was drunk. Easier and simpler. A sodbuster talked big in a saloon against you and you scared him with powder and he ran. Hardly anything could be easier than that.

Of course, Marian disliked drinking and drunken men, but Marian wasn't here— Dall suddenly straightened. The train—that's what it meant! Marian was coming back from her brief visit out of town today. She was on that train and he'd had one glass too many of Peterson's whisky. It wasn't good. Not good at all. There were only two things which really counted—doing his job right, and Marian.

Shoving into the street, Jack Dall headed for the station. His shadow moved before him. The shadow of a tall, handsome man with a panther's grace and a panther's power in him. A slim, finely balanced silhouette of a man in a rumpled broadcloth suit, his curling yellow hair touseled and a pair of freshly charged guns low on his thighs. The law.

They came up the street together. Marian and a man. A man Dall knew. A man who had been a good friend, once. Dall didn't know, now. He hadn't known Bob Francher was coming back to town. Certainly not that he would come on the same train with Marian. Still, why not?

Old Joel Francher's mercantile house was the biggest business in town. Trapper, freighter, now trader, Joel had seen many changes. He would be one of the first to know the end of another era had come to Fort Sand. And because he was old, he would want his son with him. He would have sent for Bob. As for Marian and Bob Francher, it could mean something or noth-

thing to see them coming up the street like this, together.

Three years ago nobody had been able to keep a lid clamped on the hell on wheels which was Fort Sand. Bob Francher had once met a man in Arizona, where he had gone to let a little of the devil out of his own system. He had persuaded old Joel and the rest of the town to write for this man—a gent who could make a lid stick on hell itself. A man born to the job, and a kind already growing hard to find. When Fort Sand needed a law which could contain its construction-day violence, it was natural for Bob Francher to write for Jack Dall.

Natural, too, for Francher's girl to take one look at the new law at a Saturday-night dance and maybe against her better judgment hand Bob back his ring. Natural for the courtship to be sweet and swift and the marriage soon. Perhaps even natural for Francher, who was a big enough man in his own pattern, to stand up as best man beside the woman who had been his girl and the law he had imported to rule his town.

Then Bob had gone decently East, finding business his father and he wanted done there, while the marshal of Fort Sand and his new wife settled themselves in the town. But it was inevitable that he would come back, inevitable that he and Marian should once again walk along the street, wondering if what each of them had done had been right. Dall thought of this and he stopped in the center of the street, rocking gracefully, only slightly unsteady on his feet, waiting for them to come up to him.

Marian knew him best, of course, and she saw more than Francher. In her eyes was again that saddened, deeply hurt accusation which always came when there was whisky on his breath and his suit was rumpled from a night here and there along the street without sleep. The look that came when the smell of fresh smoke clung to the barrels of his guns. She tried to understand, but the changes which gripped the town gripped her, also, and she could not understand that her husband was not going backward. He was moving forward, too, in his own way; he could not change--but she did not understand, any more than the others.

Both of them were looking toward the railroad embankment over which the running sodbuster had scrambled with the dust flung up by Dall's shots thick on him.

"Hello, honey," Dall said quietly to Marian. "Thursday came a little quicker than I expected, I guess. Meant to meet you at the station—"

Marian crossed the last few yards at a little half run and her head went against his wrinkled shirt. Dall saw the tears in her eyes and they made him angry. Not at her. She could never make him angry. His anger was at the thing with which he was grappling. Nobody knew how much it cost a man in hurt to himself and to others to do his duty the way he saw it—the only way he knew.

He saw the distaste and surprise in Bob Francher's eyes, but he put his hand out to the man just the same. He figured Bob had a right to his own thoughts until he'd had time to see how his town had changed, and so change his thinking.

"Glad to see you, boy," he said.

"Same here, Jack," Francher said stiffly, not meaning it. His eyes strayed again to the railroad embankment over which the big-talking sodbuster had

scrambled. "Trouble this morning?"

Dall shook his head with a quick, careless grin.

"Before breakfast?" he said. "No. Just cracking the whip a little. A man has got to keep his star polished up good and bright or folks get so they don't pay it any attention. Look, boy, speaking of breakfast, how about the three of us—?"

Marian stirred quickly. "I—I'm tired, Jack—" she protested.

"Another time," Francher said with the same stiffness. "Not hungry."

"I want to talk to you, Bob," Dall protested. For a moment he let his need for talk with somebody who would understand him and the problem he faced here now show through. His voice shook a little with the urgency of this need. But there was whisky smell on his breath and it was not understood. Francher nodded with a kind of hard gravity.

"I think I'll want to talk to you, too, Jack," he agreed bluntly. "After I've talked to Dad and a couple of others. Dad said in his letter something was wrong here."

"He should have come to me, then," Dall said with a stiffness of his own. "Look, Bob, you figuring to move in on me?"

The meaning of the question was plain enough. Still, Francher's gaze moved as though against his will to Marian before he answered.

"Maybe I'll have to, Jack," he said soberly. "You go home and get yourself straightened out. I'll see you later."

There had been a time when no man, friend or not, could have been so blunt with Jack Dall. There had been a time when he would have proved in an instant of blinding action that regardless of the whisky in his belly he was faster and steadier than the soberest man in the town. But that time was gone. Fort Sand was caught in change, in growth, and what would have been right once was now wrong. Recognition of this was one of the things against which Dall was struggling and he restrained the old impulse. He grinned down at Marian.

"Breakfast with you alone is better anyway, honey," he said. "Isn't it?"

Marian nodded. "Yes, Jack," she agreed, but he was afraid she was lying. At least just a little. He hoped Bob Francher would understand and side him. He didn't want the man pitched against him with the others—in everything.

At noon, having dozed for a while and bathed, Dall was again on the street. Impatience had driven him there, impatience to be out of the house. Not away from Marian. He would never want that. Too few really good things happened to a man in his life and Marian was one of the few that had happened to him. The best of them all. But the house he had provided was not her kind of place, nestling too close to the rail embankment and the shoddy, often drunken street traffic which passed both the front and back doors of the Block. It was dingy inside and cramped, and her best efforts to make it a home were a pitiful failure, even to Jack Dall.

The trouble was that he had little money for a house, little money for a table, none for clothes for Marian, in the year they had been married. It cost him all he made to do his job the way he saw it.

Peterson and his bunch—the other tenants of the ugly row of pleasure houses known as the Block—had some-

thing up their sleeves for Fort Sand. They knew change was in the air. They saw the sober growth of business here, the replacement of wooden false-fronts with more solid brick buildings, the spreading expansion of the town. There was significance to them in the fact that few men still wore their guns openly on the street and that those who had once courted the night pleasures of the Block now stayed within their own doors with their own women, their own families.

Peterson and his bunch knew they were facing a battle for their own existence and they were a fighting kind. Something would come out of the hat, one of these days. Something which Marian couldn't anticipate, or Joel Francher, or even young Bob, because each of them was changing, too, and were already forgetting the old days when a man made his own game and played it. As a consequence, there was only the law of the town—a man who couldn't change, even if he wanted to—left to keep Peterson's counsel, to watch the Block lay its plans for a last stand.

The confidence of Peterson's kind could only be bought with money—with a disarming and deceptive appearance of drinking too much, gambling unwisely, and staying blind to what went on in the back office of the Block. It was a curious situation, one he could not explain even to his own wife, Dall knew. One he could not explain to Bob Francher and the rest. Most of them would not believe him. Most of them would not see that Fort Sand must weather one more bloody birth pain before it emerged as a place of peace and prosperity.

If someone did believe, and he could tell what he was thinking, there would be danger of carelessness and of talk that would get back to the Block. Jack Dall's long, patient campaign to remain at a level from which he could see and anticipate every move Peterson and his bunch planned would be exposed and destroyed. The sacrifices—personal pride, his wife's comfort, the friendship of those on the right side of town—would have been made for nothing. It was hell to have to stand alone. But a man did his job as he saw it.

Moving along the street, Dall found Bob Francher talking to his father in front of the family store. Joel Francher eyed Dall's approach without pleasure.

"Jack, what the hell's the matter with you?" the old man growled. "I seen that exhibition this morning. We're getting plenty of farmers in the country back of us. You keep on roughing up those sodbusters and you're going to have to answer to the lot of them, one of these times, all at once. A man that's done the kind of job you've done here in the past don't have to strut, now."

"I like to cure funny ideas right where they're born, Joel," Dall said steadily. "Always have. That farmer was spreading a notion that I've turned into nothing but a saloon marshal—that I'm Emil Peterson's man."

"Well, aren't you?" Joel Francher asked bluntly.

Dall tightened his lips hard against his cigar. "You taught your boy to keep a tight hinge on his jaw, Joel," he said quietly. "Looks like you've forgot your own lesson. I got to tell you. You and Mitcham and the other store men on this side of the street have been pushing me. I don't like it, Joel. I want it stopped!"

Turning, he shot a hard glance at

old Francher's son, the one friend of whom he had always been sure in Fort Sand. "I told you I wanted to talk to you a while ago, Bob. Coming along?"

Francher nodded abruptly to his father and swung in beside Dall. They moved in silence to the Pioneer. Dall turned in automatically here, signaling for drinks. Francher spoke soberly:

"Dad's right, Jack. What is the matter? Something is. Dad and Mitcham and the others aren't pushing you—not the way you mean. They're just coming to the conclusion you're not the man they need for marshal, now. Why?"

"They expect a cat to change his stripes," Dall answered steadily. "They don't want a marshal now. They think they're big enough to get along without the only kind of law I know. They don't want a man on their street, they want a policeman—to keep drifters from swearing in front of ladies and horses from dunging up the ruts. Hell, Bob, a few brick stores don't make that much change in a place."

"You could get out if you don't agree with them," Francher suggested.

"No. If I agreed with them, that's when I could get out. If they didn't need me I could drift along. It would suit me fine. Marian and me'd have a better chance any place than we've got here. The thing is, the job I was hired to do ain't done yet and I can't move on till it is. Your dad and the rest are so blind they don't see it. That's all!"

"You're the blind one, Jack," Bob Francher corrected harshly. "I've been back in town four hours and that's plain enough, already. You're trying to handle Fort Sand like the rail crews were still building both ways out of here and we buried a man for every day in the week. That's done with—over. All of the violence, all of the need for a man tougher than the toughest to keep the street clean, are over.

"Dad tells me you've killed four men in the last year—every one of them spotted to first draw and then nailed with one shot, dead center, just like the old days. You know what Mitcham and the others are calling those killings—what maybe even Marian is calling them?"

"Murders," Dall said steadily. "I know. I know the rest they're saying. I'm gambling myself broke, drinking myself into an early grave, and letting Emil Peterson get such a hold on me that in another few months I'll be his echo. You believe it, Bob?"

Francher looked troubled. He scuffed the sawdust on the floor with his toe, his eyes traveling completely around the empty room. Dall saw with surprise that neither of them had touched the drinks set on the bar at their elbows.

"If there was just you to think about and look at I wouldn't believe it, Jack," Francher said slowly. "There never was over a dozen men in the country like you and you've outlived the rest of them. Maybe because you were the last of the kind to be born. Men who could out-drink and out-gamble the devil himself, and stay clear at the same time. But I've seen Marian."

Dall anticipated hurt and flinched from it.

"You love her, Jack," Francher went on. "Maybe as much as I always have. If you were the man I knew in Arizona—if you were the man I stood up beside when you were married—you wouldn't be hurting her now. Not for anything. You wouldn't have her living in that shack down by the embankment. You wouldn't come home to her with sour breath and empty pockets.

You wouldn't make her ashamed to walk along the streets of her town because of what you're turning into. Looking at her, I don't know, Jack; I don't know what to believe about you and Peterson."

"That was your say, Bob," Dall murmured. "We've been damned good friends and you took it big when Marian picked up my chips instead of yours. I reckon you're entitled to one say, but you've had it, now. I'll tell you just once about Peterson and me. For three years I've kept him and the rest at the Block on their side of the track and from taking over Fort Sand, to make it their kind of a hellhole. I'm still keeping him from it. He never dealt a card from the top of the table in his life and he won't, now.

"He's too big for me to clean out alone, but I've been able to keep him in his place, so far. I'm too set for the Block to dislodge by itself, but it's kept me busy. Sort of teeters back and forth between us, what kind of a town this is going to be. If the Franchers and Mitcham and the rest throw against me with Peterson, I'll go down. But I'll try to take Peterson with me. When he's gone, I'll be ready to go. Play it any way you see it, Bob. I know better than to argue with you. But stay away from Marian. She hasn't had the best in the world, but I've kept her out of this. See you do the same."

Francher shrugged.

"Half of those you cut down in the last year were farmers, Jack," he said. "Dad told me. Farmers can rile a man. Sometimes they're unreasonable. They get a notion that everybody in a town is against them and they can be mean. But farmers have got nothing to do with Peterson. Keep away from the Block. Take the pressure off of the farmers. Hang your guns up except when you need them for something important. Try to forget yesterday and last year and the year before that. Do these things and I'll see if I can quiet down Dad and Mitcham and the rest, Jack. I'll try to see you keep your job."

Dall slowly rolled the bitter taste of this over in his mouth. He had told Bob a little of what he was facing, and Bob had not understood. Francher spoke again, reluctantly:

"We got to get this straight, though, Jack. We've both of us changed too much. What I'm doing isn't for you; it's for Marian."

Turning on his heel, his drink still untouched, Francher left the Pioneer. Dall watched him go with darkening eyes. He was alone, then, with his certainties and foreknowledge and the whole burden of his duty, just as he had always been. As it was with a woman, so it was with a friend; there was a limit beyond which they could not go with a man.

Leaving his own drink untouched, he followed Francher out onto the street.

At two o'clock Jack Dall went home for lunch. Marian was waiting for him in the kitchen of the little shack beside the railroad embankment. Dall sailed his hat aside wearily and sat down, his eyes sweeping the room.

"It ain't much, is it, honey?" he asked.

"It's ours, Jack," Marian said with quiet defensiveness.

"Bob Francher thinks this is a hell of a place for you to be living. I know it better than him. I wish he hadn't pressured me. Bob's changed."

"Jack! You didn't have trouble with Bob?"

Marian's query was a little too quick, Dall thought. Still, Francher had been her friend, too. She had a right to concern for him. He shook his head. Relieved, Marian eased.

"You talked to him, though. What else did he think about us?"

"The same as he always did, as far as you're concerned, I guess," Dall told her honestly. "Some different about me. Told me just how to walk to keep my job."

"Advice, wasn't it, Jack?" Marian asked. "I was hoping he'd offer some, and that you'd take it. This town thinks it's outgrown us. Isn't it time to move, Jack? Can't we go someplace else, before—?"

"Before what, Marian?" Dall asked her, knowing she couldn't answer. "Before the rope slips out of my hands? I've tried to make you understand, like I tried to make Bob Francher understand a little while ago. You can't be happy here. I know that. Not as long as I'm working on the chore ahead of me. Maybe just because you can't understand the chore. I don't know. But here's something you've got to know: if I left Fort Sand with my work unfinished, I couldn't be happy anyplace else. Not even with you."

Marian stared listlessly at her hands. They were thinner than they had been a year ago, and the cords in their backs were tense.

"What's the answer, then, Jack?" she asked. "There has to be an answer, somewhere."

A knowledge with which he seemed to have been born stirred in Dall. He smiled wryly, gently.

"There is, honey, but don't worry about it. You can't turn it up yet. Neither can I—or Bob Francher. Time will turn it up. And when it comes, it'll be all right. That's the only thing I can promise you. It'll be all right."

Marian served his lunch, then. They ate together in silence. In half an hour he lifted his hat and pulled open the front door of his shabby little house. A man was lounging against a stack of ties at the foot of the railroad embankment, fifty yards out from the front door. He straightened swiftly, the short, heavy old Army carbine under his arm swinging in Dall's direction, the muzzle down but ready to lift.

Out of the corner of his eye Dall saw two other men, younger, but dressed in the same soil-stained gear, flanking the first. Each held a ready weapon. The three of them made a lethal triangle perhaps twenty yards to a side, covering Jack Dall from three directions. Sam Adams, the nester who had hightailed it over the embankment with Dall's lead singing at his heels, this morning. Sam Adams, back in town with his two sons for an accounting.

Reaching behind him, Dall thrust roughly at Marian, who had come with him to the doorway, spilling her aside, out of the way. He pulled the door closed at his back and stepped down into the yard. Sam Adams shouted at him:

"You first, then Emil Peterson, Dall—!"

The Army carbine shifted upward with disconcerting speed. The two Adams boys also moved. There was a mechanical aspect to this kind of thing, so that a man who knew it well did not have to waste precious time in conscious thought. Dall's right gun came clear and fired twice. His left fired once. Both weapons dropped again into leather.

A slug from the Army carbine had

splintered the gatepost four feet ahead of Dall. A cross-shot from one of the boys' guns had knocked splinters from an askew shutter on the front of the little house, perhaps a yard from his shoulder.

Sam Adams lay folded across the butt of his carbine at the foot of the embankment. One of the Adams boys was still on his feet, but only because he had leaned against a fence corner to steady his shooting hand and the corner would not now let his body fall. His brother lay on his back in the other direction, staring with unclosed lids at a sun which did not hurt his eyes.

The queer presentiment which had been in Jack Dall for a year stirred again, a conviction that he was braced against an inevitable tide. Peterson was moving slowly, but there was sureness in every step. The man was keeping his skirts clear of the mud and blood which must fly. The defeat of Fort Sand's law would be at the hands of the farmers who were Peterson's other major enemy. This was the strongest of the conflicts he had induced. The final and biggest would come swiftly, now. Dall felt eagerness with the knowledge. He was not a man for whom waiting was easy.

The door behind Dall clicked. He turned. White-faced, Marian came out onto the steps. She did not look at the fallen men. Her eyes were on her husband. There was gentleness in the accusation in them, but it was accusation—wholehearted, heavy-spirited.

"Did you ever think what might happen if you made one mistake, Jack?" she asked unsteadily. "Did you ever think what your body would look like when it was carried back to me torn full of holes? I have! In the middle of the night. In the daytime. When you were beside me and when you weren't. Jack, there has to be an end!"

"To us?" Dall asked softly. "Honey, you really mean what I think you're trying to say?"

"I don't know," Marian answered brokenly. "Sometimes I'm sure I do. Sometimes I think I didn't really marry a man—just a machine that lives to kill. Sometimes—"

"Honey, I reckon I don't want to hear the rest of that," Dall said gently. "I'm hoping you don't even want to say it. Go on back to the house, now. I'll have business uptown because of this. Soon as it's over, I'll be back."

With her arms miserably clutching her own body, Marian turned back into the house. Dall swung out past the splintered gatepost and turned up the street. Men were trotting toward him. When they saw him, they slowed to a walk. One of the first of these was Bob Francher. He signaled Dall to one side, away from the others.

"You've even forgotten how to listen when a friend gives honest advice, Jack," he said. "Get back to the house. Start packing. I'll handle this. But just this once. For Marian. It's the last time."

Dall's eyes were reaching beyond Francher to the others. Joel Francher and his angry friends. Men who had seen blood spilled and had spilled some themselves, turning stern and righteous because their town had brick along its street now, and a railroad, and so had outgrown the mud and violence out of which it had grown. Men who were impatient enough to hurry a change faster than fate intended.

"Not the last time, Bob," Dall said quietly to Francher. "Soon. But not quite yet. Get out of my way. The town

wants to talk to me—"

He put out his hand and shoved Francher from in front of him. In this instant he knew that Francher would do nothing for him and he didn't care. He didn't care even if Francher bowed up at the shove. It was only that the man was in his way and Jack Dall could not tolerate a hindrance when he was doing his job.

He strode on to where the others had pulled up. Beyond them, he saw Emil Peterson standing in the doorway of his place in the Block. Peterson was smiling. It was understandable. It gave any man pleasure to see the working out of a plan long and carefully considered.

"We got a voting quorum of the Council right here, Dall," Mitcham growled angrily at him as he came up. "Supposing you haul up and listen to us. We've had enough. You're done in Fort Sand, as of right now!"

Dall glanced, unperturbed, at Joel Francher. There was anger in the old trader's eyes, too.

"I thought Bob could straighten you out, Jack," he said heavily. "I knew you'd been good friends—"

"And you were thinking of Marian, too?" Dall cut in.

The old man nodded. "Who in Fort Sand hasn't, these last few months?" he agreed. "I've been stalling the others. But you've gone too far for even Bob—"

"I was born too far for Bob, Joel," Dall said. "Born for a time and a job that he wasn't."

"Mitch is giving it to you straight," another man cut in. "You're done, Dall!"

Jack Dall looked at them and shook his head.

"Not quite," he said. "The hall is a better place for a meeting like this than the street. A resolution has to be drawn and legally passed. And you're forgetting something else. I've got a contract. Until it expires or I resign, you can't move me. None of you—legally. I doubt if any of you want to try, the other way—"

The invitation in Dall's voice was so open that one or two of the businessmen dropped instinctively back. Dall grinned contemptuously. He hated few men, but cowards he could not abide.

"The honky-tonks in the Block have been stripping every farmer that hits their doors," Joel Francher said stubbornly, obviously thinking over his grievance aloud. "Almost as though Peterson and the rest are deliberately riling them. Now you've started going out of your way to prod every pair of overalls that comes down the street, Jack. Next thing, the sodbusters will get so hot over their treatment here they'll come in together to take it out on Fort Sand. We want business with them, not trouble. I tell you, Jack, you've got to go—and so has the Block!"

"I don't remember my old man, Joel," Dall said patiently. "I've sort of admired Bob's since I hit this town. That's why I've listened you out. Maybe what you've said is sense—especially the last. But you got it in wrong order; when Peterson and the rest of the Block outfit are gone, maybe I'll go. Not till then. Now, get off the street —all of you!"

It was strange that a man could learn to make the softness of his voice a lash with which he could drive others. It was strange that a man could own only so many pounds of bone and sinew and still see others of equal heft back from him. Even believing they

were right and he was wrong, they'd back from him. It was not a man's physical strength which made him powerful, but his strength in the eyes of others. Joel Francher and Mitcham and the rest backed from Dall while he stood in the center of the street, and presently the track was empty, with each of them gone back to his own affairs.

Once this would have given Jack Dall satisfaction. It did not, now. It was an empty triumph. He was not pitted against these men—he was trying to serve them. He had not learned to use the lash in his voice or the deadliness of his guns to intimidate their kind. Remorse plucked at him. He knew that in their blindness to his purpose, the Franchers and the rest would see to it that the next time they faced him they were strong enough to face him down. He would not again clear Fort Sand's street with voice alone.

Turning, he looked back at his house, thinking of Marian and needing her. Bob Francher was already in the yard, his hand on the latch of the door. Feeling older than thirty years had the right to make any man feel, Dall turned his back on what he saw. He needed Marian, but he doubted that she needed him. If she did, Bob Francher could likely fill the need as well as he could. Marian understood Bob Francher. Bob's duties were simple. The duties of the law were complex.

Emil Peterson was still grinning in the door of his establishment. Dall moved toward him with unhurried directness.

"Drink?" Peterson suggested with a careless wave of his hand toward the interior of his place.

Dall shook his head. "No," he said. "No more of your swill, Emil. No more of sticking close to you, watching, wondering what you were going to pull out of your sleeve. I know, now. No more guessing."

"You waving a stick at me, you run-down tinhorn star?" Peterson snapped with quick scorn.

Dall shook his head again. "No, Emil. Giving you a chance you wouldn't give me—that you wouldn't give Fort Sand. A chance to get out of here—you and the rest in the Block, with whole skins. I've been wondering for a long time what kind of bullets you were going to use to plow me under and bust up that storekeeper's outfit over there on the other side of the street. Now I know. And I'm going to keep you from firing them."

"Talk sense!" Peterson snapped, with sudden uneasiness. Sweat appeared under the hair grease where his part began.

Dall relished the man's sudden tension. "I am," he said steadily. "First time I've had enough of a hunch about what you were up to since the rail contractors left to really open my mouth. You better listen."

"I got chits of yours in my safe for more IOU's than your life's worth, Dall," the man from the Block said thinly. "Enough of them to keep your wife slinging hash for years to pay them off. She's the kind that'd do that to clean up your name, and I'm the kind that'd make her do it—if I had to."

"I know your kind, Emil," Dall said calmly. "Except for an accident of fate that set me on the other side of the fence from you, maybe I'm the same kind. You won't use your chits. You won't have time. And my wife won't sling hash. You won't be around to see her if she does. I had to stay close enough to you and the rest of the

Block to watch you all. I had to let the lot of you take a good many bites out of me. I had to swallow a lot of your poison, but it's all done. Sam Adams was too hasty and too sure a little while ago. And you were too damned expectant, standing here in your doorway. You've been prodding the nesters and farmers and setting them rasping across me every time you could."

Peterson's eyes narrowed. "I figured you'd tumble, sooner or later, Dall," he conceded. "It worried me some. But my whisky did its trick. It's too late, now. Go across the street and talk. The Franchers and Mitcham and the rest won't believe you. Not now."

"I don't need to talk," Dall said. "This doesn't involve the boys across the street. Just me and you and the rest in the Block, here. I've been waiting a long time for it. The last chore to wind up my job here. I've handled the others. I'll handle this. Get your doors closed and start packing to leave town, Peterson. You won't get a second warning."

"And if I don't—?" the saloon man asked him. "If all of us here just sit tight—?"

"You know what's coming," Dall told him. "It's a part of your plan. Only it isn't going to work out the way you've got it figured. You didn't count me in the way you should have. You didn't figure I'd still have to do my job, however the cards went down. Fort Sand has been my town, but it'll never be yours."

"Hell, you scare me," Peterson said derisively. "You know how to talk it, but you'll never be able to play it out. I'll buy the box to bury you in when it's over, Dall. The boys across the street sure as hell won't, and a woman shouldn't see her husband dumped into the ground without no box to sleep in. I'll think of your wife, even if you don't."

"You've got till morning, Emil—"

"I wish I could tell you the same," Peterson answered bluntly. "Fact is, I don't think you've got that much time, Jack."

The man turned and entered his place. Bob Francher was swinging briskly up the opposite walk. Dall had a feeling Bob had stopped on the way up from his talk with Marian to stand and watch the exchange between Emil Peterson and himself. The hunch was clinched when Bob turned into Francher and Son's store without a glance across the street.

It was funny how a man could be hurt by a thing like that. Its meaning was so clear now. Bob Francher was done with the marshal of Fort Sand. Done as completely as if one or the other of them was below ground in the pine box Peterson had offered to furnish.

Dall felt a little empty. A man didn't always have real need of friends. When he did, it was a desperate need, and to have them fail him left a wound which wouldn't close. This was the big tight. This was the day the men were to be sorted from the boys. And he had to haul it alone.

For a moment he was tempted to cross the street and talk once more to Bob. It seemed important to have at least one man understand clearly what had been behind his long vigil here behind cards and whisky bottles while Fort Sand was changing about him and everyone on the street believed Jack Dall was deliberately standing still while the rest of the town moved on. But even as the urge came, he dismissed it. If Bob could be made to un-

derstand, then he would insist on walking beside his friend when the trouble came. And out of all of this, one of them had to be left to stand by Marian. Perhaps Bob could do that best. It was better that he didn't understand what was coming.

Marian met Dall at the door. Supper smell was in the air. The warmth which greeted a man as he came home under his own roof. Her face, pale, with troubled eyes and white, strained mouth, was turned up to him. He kissed her with the tenderness she always evoked in him. There was so much he wanted to do for her—so much he had always wanted to do. So much that he had sworn he would do when this job in Fort Sand was done. So much that a man wanted to do and never got to do. He wondered if she would ever realize this. In time, he thought—yes. But Peterson had said he had no time, and Peterson could be right—

"Bob was here, Jack," Marian told him.

"I saw him."

"I've known you were stubborn, reckless, wild in your way, Jack. I've made the best of these because I loved you. But I can't believe you'd deliberately be a fool! Why can't we get out of here? Why hang on? Can't you let go?"

Dall looked soberly down at her. "No easier than I could let go of you, honey," he said.

Her lips trembled for a moment, then stiffened. "You know what's happening, don't you, Jack? Surely you can see it. Bob does, I think. And the others. What we had once is dying, throttled by your pointless stubbornness. Is a foolish professional pride that's gone out of fashion more important to you than your own happiness and—and your wife?"

"I hoped you'd never doubt me enough to ask that," Dall said steadily. "I told you the day before we were married that you were marrying the law of this town and that not all of our life together would be good."

"But some of it should be, Jack!" she protested with a sudden burst of strength. "Some little shred! Do you think it means anything to me to be married to a man who can defy a whole town because it pleases his vanity—because once that was the only way he could maintain peace for his neighbors and now he can't see the need for that sort of thing is gone? It's got to be different. I can't stand it any longer. You've got to choose!"

"Seeing Bob have anything to do with that?" Dall asked.

"I've got to be honest with you, Jack," she said with an effort. "Bob being back makes this easier for me, I think. But if I'd never seen him again—if I would never see him—you still would have to choose."

"Can you wait till breakfast, honey?" Dall asked.

Tears came into her eyes. "If I thought I'd get the answer I wanted, I'd wait till doomsday, Jack. Breakfast—?"

"At breakfast tomorrow," Dall said. And he kissed her with a sudden urgency which brought surprise up with the pleasure in her eyes.

The bell for which Dall had been listening so long began to toll while he was still at the supper table. He rose slowly, hearing it in his own ears long before its curious tolling was apparent to Marian. A kind of thunder in the earth. Having anticipated it so long,

he knew the soundless sound. The tread of heavy and purposeful feet, marching together. Marian seized his arm as he buckled on his shell belt.

"Jack, what is it? Where are you going?"

"Out to get the answer you wanted me to give you at breakfast in the morning, Marian," he said. "You stay here. Keep my coffee hot. I'd admire a cup when I come back."

"If you come back, Jack—?" Marian whispered, fear in her eyes.

"I've never left you, honey. I'm not going to, now. I've always been right beside you, wherever you've been. I always will be. You stay here, now—"

His lips brushed the damp lift of curl above her forehead. He pulled open the door, stepped through it, and pulled the door shut behind him. As he reached the gate a man came running hurriedly along the walk and almost collided with him.

"Jack! Good God, man, what are you doing out here?" Bob Francher cried. "Hell's loose. Every nester for twenty miles around is coming up the street. They're headed this way. I'm afraid they're after you. That business this afternoon—"

"I know," Dall told him curtly. "Been expecting them. Got to hurry. If they get too far along the street—"

He started ahead, but Francher jerked him back forcibly.

"Damn it, Jack, you've got to listen to me this once! They want your hide for killing Adams and his two boys this afternoon. They'll tear you to pieces!"

"Maybe they think so," Dall agreed woodenly. "Trouble is, they don't know. They've been baited in here with that idea in mind, but they'll be shoved into tearing the town down around the heads of you boys across the street from the Block. Peterson and his outfit have been building a long time for this. Get out of my way. If they move up to where he can fan them further—"

Francher stared at him as if he were crazy. Dall jerked away, angled into the center of the street, and walked swiftly up it. Ahead of him he could see the overall men. A tightly formed, well-armed group, moving purposefully. Neither increasing nor decreasing his pace, Dall held on until he was within twenty paces of the leaders of the sodbusters. They halted when he did. His voice reached calmly across to them.

"You men looking for me?"

An immediate, angry surge of sound came from the group, the bravest challenges coming from the rear ranks. Malice was in it, and the mutter of a hunger for blood.

"You're damned right!" a man in the front ranks snarled. "We came in to make sure this town has got an honest man's kind of law from here on. You're done, Dall. We're through with a killing badge. And we brought a killer's medicine to convince you if you're stubborn!"

The man waved his rifle for emphasis.

Dall knew these men believed him to be the wolf they named him. They believed him the murderer of friends of theirs, forgetting the violence these friends had tried to deliver to him. He knew that his life hung here in the half-darkness by a thread no man could see and few men could feel. A thread which often suspended the life of a man of the law. He let the lash into his voice again, laying it across them all.

"I'll listen to argument," he said.

"Who talks first?"

And with the words, his guns came into his hands as though the wind had put them there. Deadly guns, looking to each of those who faced him as though they pointed directly to each individual, rather than to the crowd. Breath went in with a common gasp.

In the instant's silence which followed, a rifle spat from the walk beside the Francher and Son store. A man in the front rank of the farmers cried out brokenly, fell against his fellows, and sagged into the dust.

In the muzzle flash of the rifle Dall had a glimpse of the face behind it. One of Peterson's dealers. So the trap was baited and now sprung, cannily, from the merchants' side of the street. Before a man moved, Dall's guns spoke. The rifleman reeled out into the street, clutching his belly. And on the far side of the street Dall's other bullet smashed in the window at the front of Emil Peterson's saloon.

Then the farmers were in motion—men frightened and angry, now become animals. They surged forward, powder-flares stabbing out from them. Ignoring them and the bullets which bit close to him, Dall fired twice more at the front of Peterson's saloon. The last shot had its desired effect. A man with a gun there, shaken by what was happening in the street and unsure of what came next, was spurred to instinctive carelessness. His gun spoke, firing blindly into the plowshare men.

The mob in the street split in halves, then. One of the halves bore on toward Dall. The other veered aside—not toward Francher and Son's and the stores to which Peterson had hoped to bait them, in the belief attack against them had come from there, but toward the Block. A stone brought down more glass. A torch was lighted. Men poured across the walk and into the doors of the Block in an irresistible tide.

Men shouted. Furniture broke. Guns spoke muffled anger. The Block seemed to shake on its foundations. It was coming down in thunderous ruin. And in the morning the other side of the street could make the peace it wanted with the men from the sod. In the morning the way would be paved for friendly trade. The Block and those who operated it would be gone. Jack Dall would be gone. Change would at last have come to Fort Sand and its boomtime marshal would have done the last chore his job required.

Lead smashed into Dall's thigh, staggering him. He rocked his guns as though firing them, for the habits of a lifetime of defense were not to be broken in an instant, but their hammers did not fall. Another chunk of flying lead stung blood from his cheek. He was backing, steadily and unhurriedly. He came to a man on one knee, leveling a gun toward the vanguard of the still advancing party of farmers. Bob Francher tipped his face up.

"Run for it!" he cried. "I'll hold the crazy fools for a minute. That one's driving the others—"

Francher's gun came up to line at a big, bearded man who was firing steadily as he advanced at the head of his companions. A third bullet smashed into Dall, shaking him to the heels of his boots and filling him with a quick, sharp hurt such as he had not felt since he was a kid. He sobbed softly with it, bending unsteadily to slash the barrel of his gun down across Francher's weapon as it fired, driving it from its mark.

"No, Bob!" he cried.

Swearing, Francher came to his feet, clutching at him, trying to give him the support of his shoulder, trying to drag him toward the walk. Dall clubbed with the barrels of both his weapons, keeping Francher away. The bearded man had halted, lowering his rifle, to turn in some command of restraint directed toward his companions, but an eager marksman among them fired from their midst again, drowning the bearded man's words. There was a new stab of the sick pain and the street tilted up crazily to slam Dall in the face.

He thought of what Peterson had said of a raw grave and he fought away from the taste of earth on his lips. He fought to his feet. He thought flames were bright behind the false-fronts of the Block and destruction was running wild there, but he couldn't trust his vision wholly. He thought firing on the street had virtually halted, but he couldn't trust his ears. He couldn't trust his legs, either, and so he sat in the dust with the big, bearded farmer lifting his guns from his hands and Bob Francher at his shoulder, supporting him.

Marian came, then, when his need for her was greater than it had ever been. Her cheek against the grime on his, one clamping hand tearing unknowingly at a wound burning high in one arm. Words on her lips, but he needed only the look in her eyes. It was enough. He was leaving Bob Francher something wonderful, but there was a part of it Bob would never have. Her first love, just as it had been in the beginning. He knew Francher would not begrudge him this. He was losing so much else.

No hurt, then. Peace. A job done—and done well enough. Lying in the street, with a man running away, shouting foolishly for a doctor. Marian kneeling beside him, clinging to Bob Francher for support. Tears in Francher's eyes. Stars in the sky, far overhead. Bright-burning stars, and suddenly a lift toward them, so that they grew steadily larger and intolerably brilliant—

A man did his job as he saw it. Beyond this and beyond love, there was nothing.

FIFTY-FIFTY

FELIPE, a *braccro*, day laborer, from Old Mexico, augmented the wages he earned in the rice fields by selling homemade tamales in the neighboring town after work and on Sundays. All went well until an irate customer got the local authorities after him.

Tamalero Felipe, much bewildered, found himself in court, totally uncomprehending the legal verbiage which charged him with selling tamales which were made of horse meat. When the full significance of this attack on the purity of his product finally filtered home to him, Felipe exploded in a storm of chili-powder protest. It was true that his tamales contained horse meat, but they also contained an equal quantity of rabbit!

His Honor, a stickler for accuracy, asked Felipe if he was sure on this point—that his tamales were of equal parts horse and rabbit; in other words, were they fifty-fifty? Felipe's face assumed an expression of beatific rectitude as he nodded his head in time to his reply:

"*Seguro que si!* Feefty-feefty—wan horse, wan rahbeet!"

—W. H. HUTCHINSON

Free-for-All

"MAJESTY'S RANCHO," the Zane Grey novel abridged in this issue, is one of the comparatively few stories that Mr. Grey wrote about the present-day West. All the romance and glamour which has come to pervade most of our ideas about the Old West has tended to obscure the fact that our American West of today still offers wonderful opportunities for excitement and adventure, as well as for making a living and enjoying life. As Ray Spears, one of ZGWM's most adept practitioners in conveying the color and feel of the Old West, likes to point out, the growth of knowledge and technology is constantly opening up new fields of action, in the West as elsewhere; he maintains that for every adventure possible a hundred years ago there are dozens today.

● "Epitaph for a Boomtown Marshal," Tom W. Blackburn's dramatic Award-winning yarn, delves into the question of what makes an individual tick to an extent seldom encountered in a Western story. Fundamentally a simple, straightforward man, Jack Dall is forced by circumstances—including his own values and personal "can't-helps"—to follow a devious course which alienates even his own wife, who represents for Dall the dearest thing that life can hold. Hating the pain which his actions cause her, but devoted to his duty as he sees it, he goes his way, alone and lonely, thought by others to be out of step with the times, but animated by a longer view than theirs; a tragic figure, truly drawn and memorable. A shining example of the author's storytelling power; an important addition to the list of Zane Grey Western Award stories.

● Author Frank Bonham, whose story, "Loaded," packs a powerful charge of conflict and suspense into a few pages, is a frequent contributor to many popular magazines. His first book, *Lost Stage Valley*, was published last fall.

● "Murder in the Worst Degree," by Walker A. Tompkins, brings back our favorite fictional dauber in a typically rollicking adventure, though this time with dark overtones of mystery and death. As usual, however, Justin Other Smith comes through it all undaunted, to prepare for his next mix-up: "The Bridegroom Wore Brass."

● No doubt we're heading for boos and catcalls by printing Carl Smith's searching article on "The Hickok Legend," at least if there are any vocal

citizens among those who prefer to accept the wildest of the versions of the West That Was. But let the chips fall where they may, we say—relying on scrivener Smith to pick 'em up, if need be.

● "Buck Ripley's Slide" is only one among many equally fine Western stories which Bertrand W. Sinclair wrote in years past. A one-time Montana cowpuncher, Mr. Sinclair now devotes the major part of his energies to commercial salmon-trolling in the North Pacific. "It is offshore work," he writes, "deep-sea, on banks where the salmon feed a long time before they come in to spawn in streams of fresh water. It is a hectic operation. The movements of fleets of trollers are governed by a number of unpredictable factors. Most of the time you are either driving like hell, or fishing like hell, or running like hell to get to cover from weather. When you are bouncing around on the North Pacific (which it seldom is) in an eight-ton troller, such things as reprint rights seem like a vague and inconsequential business." We're happy to report, however, that after his final trolling voyage last fall author Sinclair found time to locate and send us several of his old yarns to look over; more should appear in ZGWM in due course.

The August issue of ZGWM will bring you a reprint of Zane Grey's "Don: The Story of a Lion Dog," as fine and movingly written a piece of work as the author ever produced. "Broken Arrow Range," a new novelette of a strange, bitterly contested feud by Tom Blackburn, will also be featured. There will be an unusually varied array of other fiction, including stories by John E. Kelly and Raymond S. Spears, some vivid fact features, and the regular departments. Don't miss this outstanding issue—prime vacation-time reading!

—THE EDITORS.

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SILVERTIP

WEIGHING up to half a ton, the silvertip grizzly of the Rockies is the most formidable of American game animals. Indians who hunted him for hide, meat, and fat never tackled him singly. Even groups of six or more might suffer casualties, for a wounded silvertip was, and is, a terrible opponent. Although his natural disposition is defensive rather than aggressive as regards man, a sudden encounter may give him a "cornered" feeling because of his poor eyesight and lack of agility. Then he attacks savagely with king-size teeth and six-inch claws. Now a rare animal in most of his natural range, he was once a serious menace as a predator. He lacks the highly developed stalking skill of the cats, but his clumsy-appearing, headlong charge can overwhelm a startled elk or horse. Mounted hunters often experience difficulty in overtaking a grizzly in full flight. The silvertip's feeding habits are determined largely by environment, ranging from grass and ants to salmon and elk. Anything nutritious will sustain him, and domestic livestock naturally provide a welcome addition to his diet, when available.

EARL SHERWAN

WHEN DAY IS DONE
Painted by Dan Muller